

A Sirius Matter

Prologue

He lay on the private beach silently, thinking about the past year, and even more specifically about the last few days. He had finally met his godson! He couldn't get over how much he looked like James (except for the eyes) and how he seemed to act like James. It had greatly surprised him that somehow Harry Potter had gotten the Marauder's Map, but nothing had prepared him for what happened next. Just when he had thought it was over, that he was about to have his soul sucked out by a dementor, Harry and his brilliant friend Hermione had rescued him on Buckbeak. Silently he wondered if it should have been the other way around. The adult should have rescued the children. But then, he always knew that Harry was no ordinary child. He'd never forget the day James had confided the prophecy to him. That prophecy was what had led to the death of two of his best friends. He didn't want to think about that now. The dementors had made sure he'd thought about that enough while he was in Azkaban. What he wanted to think about was the prophecy. He wondered if Dumbledore had told the boy about it. Scowling, he realized that the Headmaster wouldn't want to burden that child with the truth, instead letting him live in ignorant bliss until one day he's attacked unprepared and murdered. That boy was destined to duel Voldemort, yet he probably hasn't even been taught to duel properly. It was right then and there that Sirius Black decided to take matters into his own hands.

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Chapter 1 – The Letters

It was early morning, about a week after he'd left his home to spend the summer with the Dursleys. He missed Hogwarts so terribly when he was in this house. He was lying on the bed sleeping when he heard a tapping at the window. He got up to see what owl had come, expecting to see Errol, or even Ron's new tiny owl Sirius had given him. What he saw surprised him and made him chuckle. It was some sort of brightly-colored tropical bird he'd never seen before, and it had an envelope tied to its leg. He pulled off the envelope and indicated for the bird to drink from the water in Hedwig's cage. Hedwig hooted indignantly at this and flew out of her cage and out the window, clearly upset that this flashy bird was going to share her water. The envelope simply said, "Harry." It had two pieces of parchment in it. The first was a letter, and the second one was blank. He quickly opened it and read the letter.

Dear Harry,

I hope you are well. First of all, I'd like to once again thank you and Hermione for helping me. I'd also like to say I am safe and happy where I am, but can't tell you where that is in case this letter gets intercepted. But that's not the main purpose of this letter. There is a much more serious matter I need to tell you about.

What I really wanted to tell you was the true reason Voldemort tried to kill you. I'm guessing that Dumbledore hasn't told you yet. If I'm wrong, then I owe him an apology. I believe that you have the right to know the truth. Shortly before you were born, a prophecy was made to Dumbledore by Sybil Trelawney, who was applying for the position she currently holds at Hogwarts. They were in a room at the Three Broomsticks discussing the job, when all of the sudden she went into a trance and made a prophecy about you. Snape, who was a Death Eater (one of Voldemort's followers) at the time (Dumbledore now believes him reformed, although I do not believe you can stop being a Death Eater, so please don't turn your back on him) overheard the beginning of this prophecy before being caught eavesdropping by others in the pub. He eagerly brought this information to his master. That's why he wanted to kill you. Snape sent Voldemort after you, Pettigrew led Voldemort to you, and Voldemort himself killed your

parents and tried to kill you. Those are the people responsible for your parents' deaths. Sometimes I blame myself for those deaths, but the truth is that these people are responsible.

The prophecy is on the blank sheet of paper. To read it, put your hand on it and say the same phrase that activates the map. Even then you are the only person who will be able to read it. It is very important to keep this information secret.

Your godfather and friend,

Sirius

Harry was at that moment doing his best to stop himself from performing accidental magic. He was crying from thinking about his parents' deaths, but more than anything he was furious. He was more angry than he'd ever been in his life, and that's saying something! He was furious at Snape for what he'd done, and at least as furious at Dumbledore, for letting Snape teach at Hogwarts! In Harry's opinion, Azkaban was far too good for Snape. He was breathing very heavily while his face got redder and redder, telling himself that getting another letter from the ministry wouldn't help him. Besides, he didn't want to use magic. He wanted to rip Snape limb from limb with his bare hands. He was slightly trembling from his anger as he put his hand on the blank parchment and muttered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." The words immediately appeared on the parchment.

Harry,

These are the words of the prophecy.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

Voldemort only heard the beginning. He didn't hear about marking you as his equal with the scar he gave you. At first this prophecy

could have referred to either your family or the Longbottom boy, as both your parents and his had escaped from Voldemort three times, and that boy was born the day before you were. But once Voldemort marked you, the prophecy could only be about you. I wish I knew what power you have that he doesn't know. Hopefully one day you'll discover that.

The reason I'm telling you this is so that you'll prepare for it. One day you will have to fight Voldemort to the death, and I for one want you to win. I wish I could be there to personally train you, but we both know that for now, it's impossible. If Dumbledore hasn't told you about the prophecy yet, he obviously doesn't think you're ready, so I doubt he'd train you at this time. In fact, he'd probably be upset that I told you. He doesn't even know that James told me the prophecy. It might be best for now to leave him in the dark the way he's left you in the dark. I was hoping you could get help from your friends. That girl Hermione seems very bright, and I know you trust her. I suggest telling her about the prophecy, and asking for her opinion on how to train. I do have one suggestion though. I own a house at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. It has many charms protecting it, and magic, underage or otherwise, is not detected there so you could practice spells there. I have summoned the crazy house elf who lived there away, and found out he'd let the place get very messy. I don't know how bad it is. Fortunately, you can use magic to clean out space to practice, if you choose to use the house.

Good luck.

Sirius.

P.S. Please don't murder Snape. Leave him for me when I come back. Seriously, don't trust Snape, but don't provoke him either. He is a powerful wizard and could kill you.

Harry sat silently on his bed for about a half hour calming down. "No wonder I always end up facing Voldemort," he thought to himself. "I guess I'll have to kill him." He took a deep breath. "It's not the first time I killed anyone," he continued in his thoughts. "I killed Professor Quirrel in my first year, and a basilisk and the memory of Riddle in my second. The only problems with these are that I got lucky. Sirius is

right, I have to train. He's also right that without training, Snape will kill me if I fight him. But how can I face him in class? Hermione is the logical person to ask for help. She's so brilliant. I'd better not mention my desire to reunite Snape with my parents, though. I wonder what would happen if the Daily Prophet found out that Dumbledore has the person responsible for the attack on "The Boy Who Lived" teaching at Hogwarts and tormenting him?" He then answered himself, "Snape would lose his job along with Dumbledore. Maybe I should demand that Dumbledore fire Snape. I always have to put up with the bad stuff my fame puts me through, so why shouldn't I use the good part of my fame? I won't tell Dumbledore that I know the contents of the prophecy, but just that one was made." Harry took out two pieces of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink.

"Dear Headmaster,

Sirius Black has just informed me that Severus Snape is the reason my parents are dead. That he overheard part of some prophecy about me and told his master, Voldemort, and that is why he went after my parents. I don't know why you trust him, and frankly I don't care. What I do care about is that you've let that murderer taunt me and speak ill of my parents to me since I came to Hogwarts. I absolutely refuse to sit in another classroom with that person.

For the first time, I'm going to use my fame to my advantage. If you do not fire Snape immediately, I'm going to take this story to the Daily Prophet, telling them how the man responsible for the murder of 'The Boy Who Lived's' parents is currently teaching at Hogwarts and making the bloody 'Boy Who Lived's' life, along with every other non-Slytherin's life, just a little worse!

If I do that, you'll probably be removed from Hogwarts as well as Snape. Maybe that will be for the best. I once trusted you and looked up to you. I want you to know that is no longer the case. Don't try to talk me out of this, because you won't succeed. If you're protecting him or something, do it another way! I will not put up with Snape ever again! If he's not fired within the week, I will tell the Daily Prophet everything!

Very sincerely,

Harry Potter – blackmailer, boy who lived, and the most famous wizard of his age

P.S. Snape isn't even a good teacher anyway – he always favors Voldemort's house."

Harry felt a bit bad about blackmailing Dumbledore, but then he remembered about how that murderer strutted around the castle talking about how James Potter strutted around the castle. He then tied the letter to Hedwig (who'd returned while Harry was composing the letter) and said, "Take this to Dumbledore, and hurry back. I'll have another letter for you." He then gave her an owl treat he'd had in his trunk. He then wrote to Hermione as Hedwig was flying off.

"Dear Hermione,

How are you? I'm fine. Have I ever mentioned what a wonderful friend you are? I know that during last year, I wasn't a very good friend to you, and I want to apologize. Your friendship means a lot to me, even if sometimes I forget that.

Listen, there's a very serious matter I want to discuss with you. It has to do with Voldemort. I'm afraid to put it in a letter (or say it over the phone if the Dursleys would let me), so if it's at all possible, I need to see you in person to discuss it. It would probably be a good idea to go someplace besides this house to talk about it. To warn you in advance, the Dursleys will probably be very rude to you once they learn you're my friend. If you talk to them, tell them Sirius Black, my escaped murderer godfather, sent you.

Your friend,

Harry"

Harry got up and went downstairs to do his million chores for the day. When he finally got back to his room that evening, he found Hedwig was already perched on top of her cage. She stuck out her foot, revealing a letter. He took it, said, "Thanks, girl," and gave her another treat. He then unrolled the parchment that contained Dumbledore's reply.

“Dear Harry,

I am quite disappointed in you for resorting to blackmail. However, I gather that you’re very disappointed in me as well. As you guessed, I am keeping Professor Snape at Hogwarts for protection. He turned spy for us at great personal risk. However, since you are aware of his role in your parents’ death, it would be very difficult to have you two in the same classroom. I must admit that his teaching methods are very different from mine.

I have decided to remove him from teaching, instead to have him working on an important potions-related project. He will still be living at the school, and still be the head of Slytherin house. However, he will not be teaching anymore indefinitely, at least until after you graduate. I will not be informing him of your role in this decision. I will inform him of this change in two days. If this arrangement is not acceptable to you, then respond before then.

I hope you have a good summer. I must stress however, that I only agreed to this because I know what horrible tempers both you and Professor Snape have, and fully believe that if you were in the same classroom, a duel would most likely erupt, and that would not be conducive to learning potions.

Sincerely,

Professor Dumbledore ”

Harry smiled to himself. “I guess it shouldn’t be too difficult to avoid the git if I don’t have class with him,” he said to himself. He then attached his letter to Hermione on Hedwig’s leg and sent her to deliver it. All he could do now is wait for the response. He decided to go to bed.

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Chapter 2 – Hello Hermione

Harry woke up the next morning to find that Hedwig had not returned. He listened to the house for a minute, and was able to determine based off of the snores that he was the only person awake in the house. He grabbed some of his baggy clothes he'd gotten from Dudley and took his ten minute (and not one second more, boy!) shower. He then went down the stairs as usual to start cooking breakfast. This time, he mused, they'll complain that breakfast is cold instead of late.

He was just setting the plates on the table when Petunia Dursley came into the kitchen.

"What are you doing, Freak!" shouted Aunt Petunia.

Harry replied calmly, "Making breakfast, Aunt Petunia, like I do every morning."

"Well, Freak, you're not making it anymore. Dudley's school nurse claims that he needs a diet, so now breakfast is going to be grapefruit quarters!"

"Ok," said Harry, making absolutely sure that he didn't smile upon hearing that. "I'll take away Dudley's plate."

"You'll take away all the plates!" snapped Aunt Petunia. "We're all going on the diet!"

"What?" said Harry. "Neither you nor I need a diet! We're both skinny!"

"I have nothing in common with you, Freak!" she screeched, "We're all going on that diet! Now throw away all this food that you've wasted, and don't think you won't have to pay for it with extra chores!"

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Dudley and Vernon came down the stairs. Harry was carrying the plates back to the kitchen trying to figure out a way to smuggle the food into his room.

"Hello," said Aunt Petunia politely when she opened the door.

"Hello," said a voice that Harry was very familiar with. He began walking toward the door while the Dursley males were doing the same. "Are you Mrs. Dursley?"

"Yes I am. Is there something I can help you with?"

Harry could now see Hermione, although she wasn't looking at him. She held out her hand to Petunia, who shook it while the brunette teenage girl said politely, "I'm Hermione Granger." She waited a few seconds for affect before saying, "I'm here to see my friend Harry Potter."

"What!" screamed Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley at the same time.

Uncle Vernon shouted at the door Petunia had started closing, "You want to see the freak! YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE FREAKS FROM THAT BLOODY SCHOOL OF HIS, AREN'T YOU!!! GET OUT!!!"

"DON'T YOU DARE TALK TO HERMIONE THAT WAY!" shouted two different voices at the same time. One of the speakers was Harry, who looked, Vernon noted with trepidation, very much the way he did just before he blew up Aunt Marge the year before. The other was a middle aged man with brown hair who just stepped into view, glaring at Vernon.

"My daughter told us you treat Harry like he's a freak because of his abilities, but I didn't believe it! We were just going to pick him up to spend the day with us. I think now we're going to keep him for the summer!"

Harry's face brightened, "Thank you Mr. Granger," he said politely, calling attention to himself for the first time.

He turned to the boy he'd met a few times in Diagon Alley and smiled. "You're welcome. No one should have to put up with people like these! Hurry up and pack, and then we'll go out to breakfast."

"Actually," said Harry boldly, "I cooked breakfast this morning, but Aunt Petunia told me to throw it out just before you came because

we're all going on a diet because Dudley's school nurse said he needs to lose weight. The plates are in the kitchen."

Mr. Granger, followed by his daughter, walked into the house, much to the astonishment of the Dursleys, who were eying the wand sticking out of Mr. Granger's pocket. "That sounds perfect. We'll eat and then help you pack."

Harry quickly got the food and they ate while the Dursleys watched in horror (actually Dudley watched in envy). Hermione commented, "You're a very good cook, Harry. I never knew that." Mr. Granger nodded in agreement.

"Well," said Harry slightly blushing (he'd never had his cooking complimented), "I've been doing it since I could reach the stove. Of course, it's never been good enough for the Dursleys." Mr. Granger frowned at this but said nothing.

When they were done, they made their way up the stairs. Mr. Granger was horrified when he saw the bolts on Harry's door. "They haven't used them this year," said Harry. "They're scared my godfather will come if they do," said Harry when he saw what Mr. Granger was staring at.

Hermione's father said with a smile, "Yes, Hermione told me about that." It didn't take long to get Harry packed since he had so few possessions. While they were packing his clothes, Mr. Granger said, "They really do make you wear that whale's hand-me-downs! Don't they buy you any clothes?"

Harry shook his head. "Never have and never will," he said simply. "I've never had any muggle clothing that fits properly."

"And you're a celebrity in the wizarding world?" asked Mr. Granger.

"Yes sir," said Harry, "I guess they all suppose I live in a mansion or something."

"Well," said Mr. Granger, closing Harry's trunk, "Let's go."

As soon as they were in the car and away from Privet drive, Hermione said, "Dad, can I have my wand back?"

"Sure honey. Here you go," he said, pulling it out of his pocket and handing it to his daughter, who was sitting next to him.

She turned around to speak to Harry. "I thought it would be best if the Dursleys thought dad was a wizard who could turn them all into slugs, and I thought the best way to convince them would be to simply let them see his wand."

"That was brilliant, Hermione!" Harry said, beaming at her pretty face.

"Thanks, Harry!" she said.

"Thank you Hermione and Mr. Granger for letting me stay."

"Call me Adam," said Hermione's dad.

"Thanks. Where's Mrs. Granger? I hope she's not ill."

"No," said Hermione. "She's just shopping."

"Oh," said Harry.

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The Granger residence was a lovely two story home with a two car garage that was actually used for storing cars. They parked inside, leaving room for another vehicle. Mr. Granger said, "Hermione, give Harry a tour while I go inside."

"Sure Daddy," said Hermione. "Harry," she said motioning with her arms, "this is our garage."

"It's a lovely garage," he said sarcastically.

She then grabbed his hand and pulled him in the direction of the back yard. He noticed how happy she looked showing him their garden and swimming pool, and even a complex play swing set that included a slide, a pole, and several other things like that. He realized that her whole face glowed when she smiled.

“Wow!” Harry exclaimed, “It’s like you have your own park!”

“It’s been here since I was a kid. I’m sure Dudley had one,” said Hermione.

Harry looked at her strangely. “Does Dudley look like he’d want something like this?”

She frowned, “Er, I guess not.”

“I want to go down the slide,” Harry declared and began running toward it.

Hermione chuckled, “Aren’t you a bit old for that?” she teased.

“Apparently not,” he said as he began crawling up the slide. “Come on, Hermione!”

“Oh,” she said while giggling, “All right!”

The two of them played like little kids for at least an hour. After five minutes, Harry turned it into a game of tag that became very competitive as they chased each other across monkey bars, down the slide, and any place else they could find. Eventually, Adam and his wife, Marissa, who’d apparently returned from shopping, came outside and saw the pair of teenagers acting like toddlers. After watching for about a minute, they both laughed, gaining Harry and Hermione’s attention. They both straightened up immediately and began pretending to be civilized.

“Hello Mrs. Granger,” called Harry, walking up to the woman with bushy blonde hair to shake her hand. “Thanks for having me here.”

When he got to her, she ignored his hand and pulled him into a hug. “It’s Marissa,” she said. “Anyone who can bring out that side of Hermione is always welcome!” Hermione blushed a bit. “Anyway, we came out here to tell you that lunch is ready.”

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After lunch, Hermione took him on a small tour of the house, which included of course a small library. Harry had a feeling Hermione would have given up her bedroom and slept outside if there was no other space available for the library. "My non-magical books are showing in there, and my magical ones are hidden. I'll show you where some other time. I want to show you upstairs." She took him by the hand again and about dragged him up the stairs. She pointed at one door and said, "That's the loo. Knock before you open the door in case someone forgets to lock it. And this is my room!" She opened the door proudly and showed him the cleanest, most organized room he'd ever seen. The walls were white and the carpet was pine green. He saw a wooden desk with a computer, along with a small bookshelf with about twenty books on it.

"What's that bookshelf for?" asked Harry. "I thought all your books were downstairs."

"Those are the ones I'm currently studying." He resisted the urge to tease her and looked at her perfectly made bed, which was queen size and had a pine green blanket. Next to the bed was a nightstand that had what appeared to be a muggle photograph of Hermione, Ron, and Harry.

"I thought that was a wizard photograph," said Harry, pointing at it.

"It was," said Hermione grinning. "I took a muggle photograph of the wizarding one so I could display it here without worrying about the wrong person accidentally seeing it. All of my wizarding photos are in an album in my trunk."

Harry smiled. "Hermione, I think you should show Ron that photo, and tell him you think something's wrong with it. He'll probably mourn the deaths of the images almost as much as he'd mourn our deaths."

She giggled. "That would be so cruel. He'd be so confused. We should do that!" Her face suddenly went very serious. "Now, Harry, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Harry's expression changed to serious. "Er, I think it would be best to show you a letter I got from Sirius. It's packed with my stuff."

“Ok, I’ll show you the guest room.”

They went to the next room over and opened the door to find that Harry’s trunk was indeed in there, along with Hedwig’s cage, which was empty. Harry then noticed an open window and figured that Adam had let her out when he set her cage on the desk. Harry noticed that the room was decorated with the same colors as Hermione’s. He realized in fact, that aside from the lack of a computer on the desk, and the lack of a bookshelf, it looked exactly like Hermione’s room. He opened his trunk and retrieved the letters. He handed Hermione the first one. She read it expressionless, until she came to a point where her eyes bulged out and she muttered, “Snape!” When she was finished, he read the contents of the other letter to her once he double-checked that her parents were still downstairs. She listened attentively, and then said quietly, “You should probably burn that letter.”

Harry hung his head down. “Er, yeah I will, but, er, what do you think?”

“I, I don’t know how Professor Dumbledore can let that man harass you like he does. He belongs in Azkaban, not at Hogwarts! Harry, I know you. You’re going to attack Snape the next time you see him, aren’t you?” She was beginning to look very worried.

“Hermione…”

“Not that I blame you, Harry. If he was responsible for my parents’ deaths, I’d want to kill him too! I don’t know how you’ll get through potions without trying to kill him right there in the classroom.”

“Hermione, calm down. I won’t have to. I wrote to Dumbledore just before I wrote you. I threatened to tell the whole story to the press if he didn’t fire Snape. Here’s his response.”

He pulled out another piece of parchment and handed it to Hermione while she mumbled something like, “Blackmail,” under her breath. After she read it, she sighed and said, “At least you don’t have class with him anymore. It should be easy enough to avoid him.” Then she grinned at him. “You’ve done a huge favor for the whole school.”

“Except the Slytherins,” Harry said, causing them both to chuckle.
“Anyway Hermione, do you think you can come up with some sort of training program for me?”

Hermione smiled, “You mean, ‘us,’ don’t you?”

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Chapter 3 – Going Shopping

“What do you mean, ‘us?’ The prophecy is just about me,” said Harry.

Hermione looked at him exasperatedly. “I mean ‘us,’ because I end up involved in almost all your adventures, whether I’m properly trained or not!”

Harry put his head down. “I guess you do. Maybe I should...”

“DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!” yelled Hermione.

“Think about what?” asked Harry.

“Ditching your friends to try and protect us,” said Hermione. “I know that’s what you were thinking. Even Sirius knows you can’t do that. He told you to ask for help!”

Harry put his hands up in surrender. “Ok, us. I suppose we should tell Ron, too.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” said Hermione happily, “but first I think we should come up with a plan. Before we do that, though, I think we should inspect Sirius’ house. I’d suggest we go there immediately. Maybe we can ask mum and dad to take us there.”

“Er,” said Harry, “Actually, it might be dangerous for muggles to go to a wizarding house that’s been abandoned for years.”

Hermione put her hand on her forehead. “How could I be so stupid? After Lupin taught us about all those dangerous magical creatures! No wonder you did better than me in defense! Mum and dad wouldn’t even be able to handle a boggart! Do you have any suggestions?”

“Actually,” said Harry, “it’s kind of a bumpy ride, but it would probably be best to take the Knight Bus. I’ve got a few Galleons on me. Maybe we can go to Diagon Alley so I can get more. I’d like to get some new clothes.”

She smiled at Harry, “I thought I was supposed to be the smart one. That’s a good idea. I’ll go downstairs and ask mum and dad.”

Hermione then turned around and walked out of the room with Harry following behind him.

They went downstairs to find Mr. and Mrs. Granger sitting on the couch, watching TV. Hermione walked in front of them and said, "Mum, dad, Harry and I want to take the wizarding bus and go shopping. Is that ok with you?"

"Harry getting his own wardrobe?" asked Marissa.

Hermione nodded. "He inherited enough money from his parents to get nice clothes, but he can't let the Dursleys find out."

"They'd probably find a way to steal it for their 'ittle Dudleykins," said Harry bitterly.

"Judging by what I saw this morning, you're probably right," said Adam. "How could that Professor Dumbledore leave you with them?"

"I don't know," said Harry, "but I don't plan to go back."

"Ok," said Marissa, "You can go. It's one o'clock now. Just be back by seven."

"Thanks mum."

"Here's some money so you can buy yourself something as well," said Adam, handing Hermione some money out of his wallet.

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A few minutes later, Harry and Hermione were outside and were just stepping on the Knight Bus. "Hello Harry," said Stan, "Who's your girlfriend?"

Both teenagers blushed. "Hermione's my best friend," said Harry, "not my girlfriend."

"Then why are you holding hands?"

"Look Stan, we'd like to go to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place," said Harry, changing the topic.

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After a rather bumpy ride, they found themselves standing in front of the House of Black for the first time. It had dirty walls, grimy windows, and a battered door. They gaped at it.

"I wonder if we can magically clean the outside of the house," said Harry.

"I wouldn't risk it," said Hermione. "The charms preventing detection are probably on the inside of the house."

"Maybe we can find a hose to clean the outside with later," said Harry, as he reached for the door. As soon as his hand touched the door knocker, which was the shape of a twisted serpent, he heard several loud metallic clicks. He then opened it with no problem aside from the loud creak.

"The invitation charm!" exclaimed Hermione. When Harry gave her a confused look, she explained, "When that charm is invoked, the door will only unlock for people personally invited by the house's rightful owner. In this case, you were invited by Sirius Black."

They stepped inside and closed the door, which immediately relocked. The first thing they noticed was the smell. It was as though several animals had died in there long ago. It was also dark. Harry pointed his wand up and said, "Lumos Maximus," causing the wand to light up the room.

At the same time, "Hermione pointed her wand at the room and said, "Scourgify!" which caused a large section of the floor to be cleaned up, causing the smell to lessen. While Harry kept his wand lit, Hermione cleaned up the rest of that room. They then saw several old style gas lamps along the wall. Hermione pointed her wand at them and muttered a spell, causing them all to light. Harry put out his wand and looked at the peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpet of a long, gloomy hallway, where a cobwebby chandelier glimmered overhead and age-blackened portraits hung on the walls. "Well, said Hermione, "I'd suggest we carefully walk through every room cleaning it and lighting whatever lamps are in it. We've got to be watchful for any dark creatures."

They went through the house slowly and quietly, destroying several boggarts (Hermione's was still Professor McGonagall, but she put Dumbledore's beard on her; Harry's was still a dementor, but he put a clown face under the dementor's hood) and other minor dark creatures. Hermione banished curtains full of doxies, but one of the creatures escaped and flew toward Harry, who backed up and accidentally tripped on a chair that was behind him. Hermione killed the doxie while Harry fell on the floor, causing a loud crash.

"WHO DARES DISTURB THE ANCIENT AND MOST NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK???" shouted a woman's voice from outside the room. Both teens left in search of the woman, who continued to shriek at them. "Are you plunderers, here to steal the valuable family heirlooms of the great Black Estate? The house elf won't let you escape alive!"

They found that the source of the screaming was a portrait of an old woman. "The house elf isn't here, and we're not thieves!" said Harry. "Sirius Black invited us, and we're trying to clean up this pigsty!"

"Sirius Black is in Azkaban," said the painting sadly. "I'm his mother. When he was growing up, I was very disappointed in him, but finally he grew some backbone and helped the Dark Lord. It's too bad he got caught by the ministry. How do you know him?"

"He escaped a year ago, and now he's on the run. He's my godfather. I'm Harry..."

"HARRY POTTER!!! I SEE THAT SCAR NOW! YOU BANISHED THE DARK LORD! YOU ARE NOT WELCOME IN THIS HOUSE!"

"Hermione, can you get this painting off the wall?"

"WHAT?" said the angry painting.

"I'll try," said Hermione, who tried several spells on the painting unsuccessfully, causing the portrait to laugh. Hermione yelled over the noise, "It's got some sort of powerful sticking charm on it, as well as protection from the silencing charm."

Harry then shouted back, "I'm going down to the kitchen!" He turned around and walked away, and Hermione followed. Once they were there, Harry whispered, "Do you remember what Sirius did to the Fat Lady's portrait? I'm going to get a sharp knife and cut the portrait out."

"Maybe we both should. Hopefully if we cut both sides at the same time, she won't have time to run away," said Hermione.

They went back to the portrait that was still yelling, stuck two sharp knives into the canvas, and immediately started cutting. They ignored the ear-splitting shrieks from the old woman as they managed to pull the canvas off the wall, rolling it up.

"I hope Sirius doesn't mind," said Harry, "but there's no way I could concentrate on my magic with that racket going on."

"We won't destroy it unless Sirius wants us to," said Hermione. "We'll just move her elsewhere."

"Maybe Ron could take care of her," said Harry, causing them both to laugh.

"Anyway," said Hermione, "We'd better go if we're going to have time to go shopping. You can owl Sirius about what to do with her."

"Better yet, I'll send her to him. Do you know how to shrink it so that Hedwig can carry her?"

"I can shrink it, but I think you should use a different owl. I doubt very much that Hedwig would forgive you for making her put up with that racket for such a long flight."

"I don't trust any other owl to find him," replied Harry.

"I wonder if it can be silenced now that it's off the frame," said Hermione. She pointed her wand at the screaming portrait and said, "Silencio," which caused it to immediately stop yelling. She then shrank the canvas down with no problem and stuffed it in her purse.

"Ok," said Harry, "now that that's settled, let's take the bus to the Leaky Cauldron."

“Actually,” said Hermione, “why don’t we floo there? Didn’t you see the jar of floo powder by the fireplace?”

He took a deep breath. He hated flooing, but knew that it would save time. “Ok.”

She went first, throwing down the powder into the fireplace and shouting, “Diagon Alley,” and disappeared in the green flames. Harry took off his glasses and put them in his pocket. Stating his destination very clearly, he threw down the powder and soon found himself lying on the floor next to Hermione’s feet, putting his glasses on.

After she’d helped him up, they walked as quickly as they could, hand-in-hand to Gringotts, where Harry asked to speak to a goblin about his account. Harry and Hermione were shown to a small office and told to wait a few moments. After about five minutes, a goblin walked into the room and sat at the desk. “Mr. Potter,” he said, “my name is Griphook. And your name is?” He asked, looking toward Hermione.

“Hermione Granger. I’m a friend of Mr. Potters.”

Griphook turned back to Harry. “How may I help you?”

“I’d like to know exactly how much money I have,” said Harry.

“Well,” said Griphook, “here are the exact figures.” He waved his hand and a portfolio appeared in front of Harry. He passed it to Hermione as Griphook continued. He didn’t notice her eyes widening as she skimmed through the pages. “You own the land that the Potter home in Godric’s Hollow was built on. Unfortunately your ancestral home was destroyed in the attack that killed your parents. They did however, leave you a significant amount of gold and other assets such as hotel chains and airlines. I understand that your parents used those to travel incognito whenever they needed to get away fast. Those investments have made significant profits, as is indicated in the portfolio. Hermione nodded at Harry when he glanced at her. “They also left a significant amount of gold here.”

“You mean my vault?”

“That vault is only one of several,” Griphook said. “Its purpose is to finance your schooling. You are actually one of the wealthiest wizards in Britain. You’re even wealthier than the Malfoy family.” Harry smiled at that. “If you so desire, you’ll never have to work a day in your life. You’re what muggles would call, ‘filthy rich.’”

That gave Harry an idea. “Is there any convenient way that I can use my money in the muggle world? Muggles have things called debit cards that...”

“Oh yes,” said Griphook, smiling his toothy smile. “We actually have debit cards.” He waved his hand and another paper, along with a quill and ink, appeared in front of him. “There’s a startup fee and transaction fee. Just read that paper and sign it if you agree to the terms.”

He and Hermione read the form. He looked at her as if to ask, “What do you think?” She nodded and he signed the form. The form disappeared, replaced by a visa credit card, which Harry immediately put in his old-looking wallet. Harry then asked, “Could you start owling me financial statements every month?”

Griphook smiled. “Actually, Mr. Potter, that portfolio is charmed so that it is always accurate. You can check it anytime to see what you own. In fact, you should find that the startup fee for your debit card has been removed already.” After they confirmed that, Harry was satisfied.

After they left the room, Harry took a significant amount of gold out of his vault. He then grabbed Hermione’s hand, and together they headed toward Flourish and Blotts. Harry looked at Hermione and smiled. “Look around the store. Grab any book you think would be useful. Try to be quick because we still have to go muggle-clothes shopping, but I want to make sure we have what we need to get started. We’ll probably take another trip here soon, when we decide what else we need from the shops here.”

“No problem,” said a beaming Hermione, as she hurried through the store, scanning the titles and grabbing the interesting ones. Harry thought she appeared to be on a muggle shopping spree as she handed him the huge stack she’d already acquired. Once she was

done, Harry decided to add a bottomless weightless trunk that they also sold to his purchases. His pockets significantly lighter, they hurried out of Diagon Alley, through the Leaky Cauldron and onto the streets of London. Harry was going to call the Knight Bus, but Hermione stopped him by saying, "There's a mall within walking distance." She grabbed his hand and about dragged him toward their destination.

After Hermione had picked out a new outfit for herself like her father told her, Harry decided that the best thing for him to do was to let Hermione pick out his clothes. She had him try on a few things to determine his size. She then started filling a cart with jeans, shorts, swimming trunks, t-shirts, jumpers, underwear (which embarrassed him), and socks. She even had him get a few muggle suits, one black, one navy blue, and one dark green, which she claimed made him look, "very handsome." She then picked out shirts, ties, belts and socks to go with them. She then had him try on trainers. He paid for it all with his new visa, and then changed into one of the outfits before leaving the store. When they got out of there they were bogged down with packages which they put into the bottomless trunk as inconspicuously as possible. When they were finished, they hailed the Knight Bus and went back to Hermione's home.

When they got there, Adam, who was watching TV in the living room, said, "You're five minutes late."

"I'm sorry sir," said Harry. "It was my fault. Don't blame Hermione, she was helping me."

Adam Granger smiled, "Ok, we can stay the execution. I must say that I like your new outfit, Harry."

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Chapter 4 – Feelings and Trust

After they'd spent a few hours with Hermione's parents (eating dinner, watching a movie), Harry and Hermione walked upstairs to Harry's room, where he'd carried the new trunk when they got back. Together, they started putting Harry's clothes in the dresser and closet as appropriate.

Hermione said, "You really impressed dad tonight."

Harry looked confused. "Impressed him? How? I got you home late."

"And you took responsibility," said Hermione, "He'll never admit it, but that impressed him. He expected you to make up an excuse like I took too long shopping or something. Instead, you just said that it was your fault and not to punish me."

"Well," said Harry, "It was my fault. Anyway, what did you think about Grimmauld Place?"

"It could really use a new decorator," she said grinning, "but I think it wouldn't take more than a few hours to turn one of the rooms into a dueling room so we can practice defensive magic. I think we at least made it safe for muggles, as long as they don't mess with any objects that might be cursed, so we can tell them about it tomorrow. I don't think they'll have time to visit the house then, but they will want to visit, if only for a proper demonstration of magic. They don't ever actually get the chance to see what I'm learning."

"I was wondering why you didn't tell them about it today," said Harry.

"I was afraid they'd insist on joining us, or else forbid us to go to a potentially dangerous house. Well, I think you'll want to put these away yourself," said Hermione with a smirk, indicating his new underwear, the only clothes now left in his trunk. He quickly grabbed them and threw them in a drawer, anxious to get them out of sight. While he was doing that, she started pulling out the new books and laying them on his bed in several small piles.

"What are you doing?" asked Harry.

"I'm organizing the books based off of the topics. Here are advanced charms books. Over there are defensive magic books, including one on defending your mind. The magical branch is called occlumency. It sounds fascinating. There are wizards who use what's called legilimency to read people's thoughts, and occlumency is the defense against it. We need to make sure no one can read the prophecy or anything about our training out of our minds. Over there are books on the dark arts, which reminds me, we may want to visit Knockturn Alley at some point later on if we need to learn more about the dark arts. Hopefully we won't. She pointed out several other types of books, until she reached the last four. "...and this book, 'Unlocking Your Magical Potential' is about specific magical exercises that are supposed to help you learn to use every bit of magic inside you."

"What does that mean? Don't we already know how to use our magic?"

"Not entirely. Most wizards and witches don't ever use their full potential. It's kind of like the way we don't use most of our brain. We slowly learn to use more as our magical education continues, but then we stop learning. Most Hogwarts graduates don't use half of their potential. Your spells are supposed to have greater potency if you put more power into them, and you'll be able to perform spells you wouldn't have been able to before. This book shows ways to focus your mind more so that you channel more of your magic. This next book is on wordless and wandless magic."

"What?" said Harry, "We need a wand to do magic."

"No we don't," said Hermione. "Everybody does wandless wordless magic as children, and it's called accidental magic. Last year you did an impressive, albeit illegal, demonstration of wandless, wordless magic on your aunt. Wands help us to focus our magic, but aren't necessary. I honestly wonder why we bother with wands. It may be harder to learn magic without them, but it would make us better wizards. I remember my first accidental magic. I was seven years old. I was in a library with my mum reading, and she took a book from me, claiming it was too advanced for me to understand. I was really upset. She put it back on the shelf and started walking back toward me. The book came off the shelf by itself and floated back to my table."

Hermione smiled. "I did my first summoning charm, and it was without words or a wand. Now this year Professor Flitwick is going to teach us the proper wand movement and incantation, which by the way is, 'Accio book.' Anyway, I don't understand why they get us so dependant on wands."

"So they can snap them," said Harry thoughtfully.

"What?" asked Hermione.

"Think about it. When the Ministry of Magic thought Hagrid had opened the Chamber of Secrets, they snapped his wand to prevent him from doing magic. If the Ministry arrests someone, how do they disarm them?"

"They take their wands," said Hermione, with a look of comprehension. "It's all about having a means to control magical people. If you think you need a wand, and they take that from you, you feel helpless."

"The trouble is, that's what the bad guys will want to do, too."

"I think we need to make learning wandless magic a priority. According to the introduction, it's very difficult to master doing your first intentional wandless magic at will, but once you've learned the focus necessary, you can learn to do almost any spell. The book starts by making you focus enough to do nonverbal magic with a wand, and then tries to teach you to do it without. There are forty chapters, and it recommends studying and practicing one chapter per week."

"Ok," said Harry. "We've just got to remember not to let anyone else know about whatever extra skills we learn. What's the next book about?"

"Magical methods of transportation. It teaches apparition, making portkeys, putting fireplaces on the floo network, even how to charm brooms and other things like carpets to fly. These skills could come in handy when planning an escape, rescue, or raid."

"Isn't some of that illegal?" asked Harry.

“Yes,” said Hermione.

“Then why does Flourish and Blotts sell a book on it?”

“It clearly states at the beginning that the spells listed are not to be used for illegal purposes; that it is only for educational purposes. That covers the writer, publisher, and store if one of their customers is caught.”

“What’s this last book about?”

“Human transfiguration,” said Hermione proudly.

“You mean becoming animagi, like Sirius.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “It says you can become animagi within a year of starting this book. I think that being able to transform would be a great advantage if we were attacked.”

“So do I,” said Harry, “That’s a good idea. We have to keep it secret, though. Unregistered. I don’t want any potential enemy to know about it.”

“Agreed.”

“So,” said Harry, “How does our schedule look?”

Hermione took out a muggle legal pad and made a chart for the week, putting everything between 6 a.m. and 12 p.m. into hour blocks. She wrote exercise for the first hour. “My mum has an exercise video I think we should try using. If we don’t like that, we’ll find something else. The next block (7-8) was showering, breakfast, and travel to Grimmauld place. The next hour (8-9) was reading the day’s subject (advanced charms, defensive magic, magic potential, wordless-wandless, animagi, magical travel, and occlumency on Sunday through Saturday respectively), and then the next hour (9-10) was practicing what they read. The next hour (10-11) was to practice dueling so that they’d develop battle instinct. Then they’d come back home.

Harry said, "I wonder if we could put your house on the floo network to save travel time."

"That would be a good idea. I think I'll read about that tonight. I wonder if there are laws that allow or prevent a muggleborn's home to be on the floo network. Anyway, there's one other thing I thought we might do, Harry. I'd like us to enroll in a muggle self-defense class."

Harry smiled. "You mean learn karate?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes. Once the summer's over, we could probably continue learning from a book, but I think we'll need a background of actual practice. We'll have to ask mum and dad about it. I don't suppose they could stop you, but they most certainly could stop me. I say tomorrow morning we wake up at six and use that exercise video, and then we try to make breakfast to soften them up..."

"I can make breakfast," said Harry, "The Dursleys made sure of that."

"...and then we ask them if we can practice magic at Sirius' place. We don't need to discuss the threat of Voldemort for that. We're just studying."

"What about the exercise and karate?" asked Harry.

"Very simple," said Hermione. "We'll simply tell them that Hogwarts doesn't offer physical education, but we both decided that we want to be in good shape. And we'd also like to learn some self-defense, just in case we run into some problem. You're famous in our world, so that means that there may be some crazy people out there who might try something."

"Ok, Hermione," said Harry. "Once we have their permission to start, we should talk to Ron."

"Ok. I guess we should mail Sirius his mother now, shouldn't we?"

"I guess so," said Harry, as he took the legal pad from Hermione and turned to a blank page. Using a muggle pen, he wrote,

"Dear Sirius,

Thanks for the information. I've taken your advice and asked for Hermione to help me, which she has agreed to do. Tomorrow, we're going to talk to Ron. We went to your house. It was a mess, but Hermione and I sorted it out mostly yesterday. We found a portrait of your mother. She didn't seem to like us, and would have been a great distraction from our important work. After trying to remove the whole portrait, we found that some type of powerful sticking charm was on it. We cut the canvas off the wall, shrunk it, and silenced it. We hope you're not angry about that. That's what's on the canvas. You can decide what to do with her. As Hermione explained it to me, the charm on your door makes it only respond to people who have been personally invited by you. If you wouldn't mind, could you send a written invitation to those two, in case they come to your house alone?

Sincerely,

Harry"

Then he called, "Hedwig," who immediately flew to his wrist. Harry tied the paper, along with the rolled up shrunk canvas, to her leg, and she flew off into the night.

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That morning, they did exactly what they said, getting up at six. They found the exercise video adequate for now. It had them doing sit-ups, push-ups, and several stretches and aerobic exercises that left them worn out. Hermione took the first shower while Harry looked around the kitchen to figure out what to cook for breakfast. He got everything he would need ready so that he could start cooking once he was out of the shower. As soon as Hermione came back downstairs, he went to his room, grabbed some clothes, took a quick shower, and then went back downstairs to cook omelets and sausage. As he was just finishing up, Mr. and Mrs. Granger came downstairs.

"Good morning, Adam, Marissa," said Harry.

“Good morning, Harry,” said Marissa. “Adam told me you were a good cook, but you didn’t have to do this,” she said as he prepared the plates while Hermione got the silverware and drinks ready.

“I wanted to thank you for letting me stay here,” said Harry, as he set a plate on the table in front of Mrs. Granger. “I really do appreciate it.”

“It’s our pleasure, Harry,” said Adam. “We’ve got to go to work. What are your plans for the day?”

“Actually daddy,” said Hermione, “that’s something we’d like to talk to you about. Harry got a letter from his godfather that says that he has a house in London that’s protected so that underage magic can’t be detected in there, and we’d like to go over there for a few hours every day to practice spells from next year’s classes, if it’s alright with you, that is.”

“Hm,” said Adam, “Alone here or alone there. How many hours a day did you have in mind?”

“Just 8 a.m. until 11 every day,” answered Harry.

Adam said, “That should be fine. I think Marissa and I would like to go there for a demonstration on our next free day. We’ve never actually seen Hermione perform a spell.”

“We’ll arrange a special demonstration for you. We’d also like to visit Ron Weasley today so we can invite him to join us tomorrow if he’d like.”

“That sounds fine,” said Marissa, “Just be back by 5.”

“Er, there’s one other thing,” said Hermione, “We’ve been talking, and, as I told you before, Harry’s famous in our world.”

“Yes,” said Adam.

“He wanted to sign up for a self defense class so that he could defend himself in case some whacko comes after him, and, er, I’d like to join him.”

"Honey," said Mr. Granger, "I don't really think that it's nec..."

"...necessary for a young lady to be able to defend herself?" interrupted Mrs. Granger. "I disagree. I think it would be an excellent idea."

"Fine," said Adam, realizing that he'd never win an argument about this. As scary as that idea was, he knew that even the muggle world wasn't safe. "Just don't go looking for trouble once you know how to defend yourself."

"Thanks, daddy," said Hermione, throwing her arms around her father.

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Once the parents were gone, Hermione said, "I guess we'd better catch the Knight Bus if we want to keep our schedule."

"So, did you get the chance to check if you get your house on the floo network?" asked Harry.

"I did and we can't. The normal way is asking the ministry to do it, but they won't put a muggle house on the floo network except temporarily for emergencies. The book has a spell for making a private floo network, but it would need to be performed here," she said with a neutral face.

"Oh, well," said Harry, "Then the bus it is."

"Actually," said Hermione, now beaming, "I found a better way!"

"What's that?"

"A portkey!" she said.

"I know that's one of the types of travel mentioned in that book, but what is a portkey."

"Any object that has been charmed to transport you magically from one place to another. There are several kinds. One can be set to leave at a specific time. Another can be activated by touch, and

another by saying an incantation while holding it. There are a few other kinds, but the third one is my favorite. You can carry it with you and not worry about it taking you when you're not ready to go. It's a complex spell, but I think I can make a few at Grimmauld Place to take us in between this house and there. I'm making two because I think we should each carry a portkey with us at all times in case we need to escape."

"You really are a genius!" said Harry.

She blushed and said, "Only if it works."

They grabbed the books they'd need that day and rode the Knight Bus to Sirius' house.

While Harry picked out and arranged a room that they could practice magic in, Hermione started working on the portkeys. She'd brought a few of her necklaces with her. One was silver with a small heart, and the other was simply a gold necklace with nothing on it. She decided that a necklace would be easiest to keep on you at all times so that you only have to say the proper words instead of digging into your pocket for it and then saying the words. She decided that Harry would wear the gold, and she'd wear the silver. "The trick," she thought to herself, "is to come up with words we won't accidentally say and then disappear in the middle of a conversation." She decided to use short phrases.

Harry finished preparing the room, and then sat down to begin reading. He'd read a few pages, and then his thoughts would drift toward Hermione. If he wasn't thinking about how smart she was, he was thinking about how helpful she was. If it wasn't that, it was how much he trusted her. If it wasn't that, it was how much he enjoyed being with her, and how much he liked holding her hand. If it wasn't that, it was how nice she looked in muggle clothes.

Harry startled at that idea. "When did I start thinking she looked nice?" he asked himself. "Probably when she showed up at my door," he answered. "Actually," he said to himself, "I think I started feeling like this when we traveled back in time together a week ago." He smiled to himself, "Am I starting to feel, 'that way,' about her?" He supposed it wasn't unreasonable. She was certainly a nice girl.

"I wonder if she feels anything like that toward me?" he wondered. He then realized that if she did, she'd probably hide it the way he wanted to, and hope that he'd make a move. He was the male after all. He then thought, "What if I approach her and it ruins our friendship?" Then a logical part of him that actually sounded like the girl in question said, "It won't ruin your friendship. Even if she doesn't like you like that, she'll probably be flattered. It might be a bit uncomfortable at first, but as long as you're ready to accept her answer and don't try to push her, it'll be fine. If you were brave enough to face Voldemort twice, why are you afraid to face Hermione?"

He still didn't know what he'd do, so that logical voice said, "If you don't do anything about it, you're going to go out of your mind before the summer's over! You're already talking to yourself." Harry put his hands on his head as though he were about to pull out his hair and let out a small scream.

"What's wrong?" came Hermione's voice from across the room. He quickly turned to see her holding a gold necklace.

"Er," he said, looking at the ground, "nothing."

"Then why do you want to pull your hair out?" she asked with a grin. He felt his heart start beating faster as she approached him. "Were you thinking about the prophecy?"

"No," he answered, trying to look at anything but her.

"Then what are you thinking about?" she asked, now looking a bit worried.

Harry looked down at the floor in silence, hoping she'd go away so that his heart would stop beating so fast.

"Come on Harry," she said, "look at me and answer my question."

He looked up into her brown eyes and muttered, "You."

"What was that?" she asked, apparently not hearing him.

"You, alright, I'm thinking about you," he said, making absolutely sure he wasn't yelling.

"Me?" she asked, a small smile starting to form at the corners of her mouth, "What about me?"

"Er," he said, thinking that he might as well just say it. "I've been thinking about how smart, helpful, and wonderful you are, and how pretty you look in that outfit, and wondering if you, er, maybe, kind of, liked me, a little." He started out fast, but slowed down as his face got redder and redder. "I'd, er, understand if you don't, I just had to say it before I go crazy."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Could he really mean what she thinks he means? "Er, are you trying to say that you, you fancy me?"

At this point Harry was no longer capable of speech, as he prepared for rejection. How could he be so stupid to think she might fancy him? He closed his eyes and silently nodded his head, resigned to the rejection that he was destined for. He felt like Sirius must have, when he was locked in the tower, awaiting the dementor's kiss. "Ok," he admitted to himself, "that's a bit overly dramatic, but I know I'm not gonna like this."

"And you want to know if I fancy you?" Hermione asked, her face smiling brightly as her cheeks reddened.

"Here it comes," thought Harry, whose eyes were still tightly shut.

"I, er, do fancy you, Harry." His heart stopped for about five seconds as he looked up at the smiling girl before him. "I, well, just never thought you'd fancy me. I mean, I'm just a know-it-all with bushy hair and buckteeth..."

"Not to me!" declared Harry. "I don't want you to say that about yourself ever again! You're the most brilliant, caring person in the world, and you are pretty!"

"Um, I don't know what to say." She sighed, "Thank you, Harry, but you're the good-looking one. I mean..."

“Good-looking? With that ugly scar across my forehead!”

“You’re good-looking to me, as well as the bravest, most noble, humble...”

“So, er, will you be my girlfriend?” He cut her off because he can’t stand hearing praise about himself.

“I thought you’d never ask!” she said with a smile.

He hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

“Harry,” she said timidly while her cheeks got very pink, “Er, well, boyfriends and girlfriends don’t just kiss like that. Er, they kiss on the lips.”

Harry’s cheeks were now bright red, “I, er, know. I just, well didn’t want to push you into doing something you didn’t want to do.”

She smiled at her first boyfriend, feeling more confident because he was more nervous than she was. “Thanks, Harry. That’s a very good rule that I want you to follow, but in this case, I want you to kiss me.”

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After they spending an appropriate amount of time experimenting with their first kiss, Harry, whose face was still red, asked, “What did you come in here for anyway? Did you finish making the portkeys?”

“What? Oh yes, portkeys. I’ve got yours here. I wrote down the phrase you say when you want to leave so that I don’t accidentally disappear while explaining it to you.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to him. “As long as you’re wearing this necklace, when you say these words, you’ll disappear and go to the right place.”

“Did you test them?”

“No, I thought I’d let you know. That way, if something goes wrong, you’ll know where I went. If I can’t get back for some reason, I’ll take the bus here so don’t worry.”

"No," said Harry. "I'll take the risk. I'll go," he said taking his necklace out of her hand and saying, "House One Now," as he slipped it over his head. He felt a pull from his navel as he watched his girlfriend fade away. He found himself fallen on the floor of Hermione's bedroom. He blushed as he thought of possible implications of that. He then said, "House Two Now," to portkey into the living room of Sirius' house. After he got up off the floor, which he'd fallen onto again, he noticed that Hermione was waiting for him, with an amused look on her face. "It worked perfectly, proving yet again that you are the brightest witch of your age!" he said.

She was caught between anger and glee. She said, "Harry, you shouldn't have just taken the portkey like that without discussing it with me, but I'm glad it worked."

"Hermione," he said, "I'm sorry, but you were gonna do the same thing."

"Er," she said, "well, I guess you have a point, but it doesn't always have to be you who takes risks."

He knew he didn't want to have their first argument today, so he said, "Noted for future reference. Do you want to test yours now?"

After she'd gotten back from a successful trip to her house, Harry asked, "Why does it go to your bedroom?"

She blushed. "Not for the reasons you might think. My parents sometimes have muggle guests, and I don't want us to appear out of thin air in front of them. I picked the room least likely to be occupied when I'm not there. I'm going to have to trust you not to pop in while I'm changing or something. If you do, I'll tell my dad you tried to rape me."

"You wouldn't!"

"Yes I would," she said firmly.

"I guess we've spent enough time here," said Harry. "We shouldn't get started on our training before we've invited Ron anyway. I say we visit him and then find a karate school."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Hermione. "Er, what do we tell him about us?"

"Well, that's a good question. I think he might fancy you. Not that I blame him," he added, grinning. "I suppose we'll have to tell him the truth."

They then flooded to the Burrow, and were greeted immediately by an enthusiastic Molly. "Hello Harry dear! This is an unexpected pleasure!" she said as she engulfed him in a hug. When she released Harry, she said, "Hello Hermione," and embraced her as well. "It's almost lunchtime. You must join us!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, we'd love to!" said Hermione, "but first we need to speak to Ron for a few minutes."

"Of course dears. He's outside with Ginny degnoming the garden."

They walked outside to find the two youngest Weasleys throwing gnomes over the fence, apparently competing over who could throw the farthest. It was surprisingly close, Harry noticed, Ginny is stronger than she looks. Just when he was thinking that, the redhead in question turned and saw Harry and Hermione walking toward them. Her eyes immediately went to the new couple's hands, which were holding each other as they walked. Ginny appeared a bit pale for a second, but then seemed normal. She said out loud so Ron could hear, "Hello Harry and Hermione!"

"What?" said Ron happily as he turned. Harry noted that Ron's smile faltered for a second as his eyes too rested on the holding hands. "Hi guys!" Ron said, "What brings you here?"

"Actually," said Harry, "We want to talk to you."

"Go away, Ginny," Ron said.

"Fine!" she said, "You can..."

"Actually Ron, we'd like to talk in a place more private, like your room," said Harry. Then he turned to Ginny and said, "I'm sorry Ginny, but this is a very private matter. I hope you're not mad at us."

Hermione and I would love to catch up with you before we leave. We're staying for lunch."

Ginny seemed a little less angry when she said, "I guess it's all right."

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When they reached Ron's room, the youngest male Weasley said, "Ginny sure calmed down when you talked to her. I don't care what she says. She still fancies you, mate."

Harry looked uncomfortable. "Er, I suppose we should get this out of the way first then. Hermione and I are now dating."

"What?" asked Ron, looking at Hermione for confirmation.

"It's true Ron. We just started this morning. You're the first to know," she said.

"Er, well I never guessed...well, it's a surprise, but, well I guess if you're happy..."

"We are," said Hermione.

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" asked Ron.

"One of the reasons. The other is a confidential issue. You know how I always end up facing Voldemort or his followers, and you two end up with me most of the time."

"Yes," said Ron.

"Hermione and I have decided to start training every day so that we won't have to rely on pure luck the next time we're in trouble."

"Training?" said Ron.

"Yes," said Hermione. "We exercise in the morning at my house, and then we portkey to Sirius' house, where underage magic can't be detected."

“You can do magic there,” said Ron, “Wait a minute, Harry. You go there every day. You exercise at Hermione’s house. Why are the Dursleys letting you go?”

“Actually, I’m staying at Hermione’s house.”

“What?!” said Ron, his face turning pink. “You’re staying with her! No wonder you’re together! You’ve probably...”

“What Ronald?” asked Hermione. “What do you think we’ve done?”

“I’ll bet you just want me at that house to lie and say you weren’t doing anything but studying! I’m not gonna do it!”

“What?” said a clearly shocked Harry. “That’s not what this is about! We were planning this training before we got together! This has nothing to do with that!”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron, “Where were you when you got together?”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and blushed.

“See,” said Ron. “I knew it!” He got up and stormed off, slamming the door, and leaving Harry and Hermione in his room, in utter shock.

About fifteen seconds later, the door opened, and Ginny came in quickly, shutting the door behind her. Her face looked pale. “You go to Sirius Black’s house? What if he finds you? Harry, he wants to kill you!”

Harry looked from Hermione to Ginny. “Listen Ginny, I’m not gonna talk about your snooping, cause it’s probably pointless, but what I am gonna tell you has to stay a secret. Only Dumbledore, Lupin, Ron, Hermione, and myself know this. Sirius Black was innocent. Peter Pettigrew, an animagus your family knew as Scabbers the rat, was my parents’ secret-keeper. He betrayed them to Voldemort. Then Sirius tracked him down, but Peter killed all those muggles and escaped as a rat, leaving Sirius to take the blame. Peter found your family and got you to take care of him for years.

“While Sirius was in prison, he saw the picture of your family that included Scabbers, who Sirius immediately recognized. He broke out of Azkaban, not to kill me, but to kill Pettigrew. That’s why he went to Ron’s bed with that knife. He was after Ron’s rat. We found out all this on the day Buckbeak escaped, but Pettigrew managed to escape again.

“Fudge decided to take Snape’s word over Ron’s, mine, and Hermione’s word. He wouldn’t even give Sirius time to wait for Lupin’s testimony before the dementor’s kiss was to be performed. I won’t tell you how, but Hermione and I freed Sirius. He’s my godfather. Obviously I can’t live with him since he’s on the run, but he does what he can for me, including giving me access to his house.”

Ginny just sat there wide-eyed listening intently, taking in all of this information. When he was finished she said, “Scabbers? I sometimes fed him and petted him. I even cleaned his cage a few times for Ron. Ewww!” Then she looked at the two of them with an evil grin. “I’ll keep your secret if you let me go to that house.”

“What?” said Hermione, “Why?”

“I heard you say you can do magic there. Let’s just say there are some spells I want to practice.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” said Harry. “What do you think, Hermione?”

“Hmm. Maybe if she studies occlumency with us.”

“What’s occlumency?” asked Ginny.

“A way to stop someone from reading your mind so no one can steal our secret from you,” answered Harry.

“That sounds like something I’d want to know anyway,” said Ginny.

“Then we’ll pick you up on Saturday mornings at 8 o’clock,” said Hermione. “We’ll study occlumency for an hour together, and then let you do your own thing for two hours. We’ll leave at 11.”

“By the way, Ginny, we want anything you learn about our training or anything else while you’re there absolutely secret,” said Harry.

“What else will you give me for that?” asked Ginny.

Harry was getting frustrated with her game, “I never thought I’d say this when Dumbledore mentioned life debts last week, but you owe me a life debt, and keeping this training secret could save my life one day, so I am counting keeping my secrets as part of that life debt. In the wrong hands this information could cost my life. If my enemies somehow find out that I’m training, then they will attack me with more force than if they don’t know. I want them to underestimate me.”

“All right, all right, Harry! I know you saved my life! And I’m grateful! I promise I’ll keep whatever secrets I may stumble upon. I was just having fun.”

Harry relaxed a bit. “I know you were, Ginny. I know that you would never deliberately betray me. I just wanted to stress how important these secrets are to me. Don’t tell them to anyone, not even Ron. He’s mad right now, but I’m sure that won’t last forever. But even then, if I want Ron to know something, I’ll tell him.”

“Ok, I won’t threaten to tell secrets, but could I come more often than once a week? I know you floored here based off of the soot that’s still on you, so couldn’t I go that way?”

“I’m not sure,” said Hermione. “It’s a very secure house. We can floo out anywhere, but we haven’t tried flooing in. It may have some system that won’t let you floo in. We should ask Sirius before trying that.”

“Ginny, we go there at 8 every morning. I suppose we could get you some of those days and let you practice whatever hexes you want while we train. Do you know what days you can come?” said Harry.

“I’ll have to find out from mum. I’ll owl you the day before.”

Lunch wasn’t nearly as tense as it could have been, since Ron spent a lot more time concentrating on his food than his anger. After lunch was over, the couple portkeyed to Hermione’s home, where she said,

“I’m glad you didn’t tell Ron about the prophecy. Ginny would’ve overheard.”

“I had a feeling she was gonna listen in,” said Harry.

“Do you think we can trust her?” asked Hermione.

“She won’t betray me to Tom Riddle, if that’s what you mean. She just wants to feel that she knows what’s going on. But I don’t want to talk about the prophecy when she’s in the house. I want to put a silencing charm on the room when we’re at Grimmauld Place with her.”

“Alright,” said Hermione. She then pulled out her phonebook to find karate schools. After calling a few different ones, they settled on one in town that would give them lessons at 1 p.m. every weekday. Hermione suggested they bicycle there. “It will be extra exercise, and it’ll be fun to do something the muggle way.” They went back out so Harry could buy a nice bicycle. When they finally got back home, they started playing the same game of tag they’d played the day before, only this time, as boyfriend and girlfriend. Neither said anything, but both were dreading telling Hermione’s parents.

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Chapter 5 – Discoveries

When the Grangers arrived home from work, they found Harry and Hermione sitting on couch in the living room playing a Super Mario Brothers Nintendo game together. “Hello Hermione, Harry,” said Marissa. “How was your day?”

“No,” said Harry, as his character missed a jump and fell into a pit. “Er, it was fine, Mrs. Granger.”

“Harry, I already said to call me Marissa.”

“Er, yeah. Hi Marissa, Adam.”

“Hello Harry. Hermione, you’ve been awfully quiet,” Adam said, smiling.

“Er, Hi Mum, Dad.”

“I noticed a new bike in the garage,” said Adam. “Is it Harry’s?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “We enrolled in a karate class here in town, and Hermione suggested we ride bicycles there.”

“Good idea,” said Marissa. “It’ll give you even more exercise than the video you used this morning.”

Both teenagers looked at Marissa. They hadn’t told her about the video. “How did you...” asked Hermione.

Marissa said, “I noticed it had been moved, that’s all. It’s fine. I certainly don’t mind. I must admit I’m curious why all of the sudden physical fitness is so important to you.”

“Well,” said Hermione nervously, “Hogwarts doesn’t have any physical education, and we wanted to wanted to form our own exercise club next year. We figured that it would be a good idea if we knew what we were doing.”

Harry stopped himself from glancing at Hermione, who’d just lied to her parents.

“That sounds like a good idea,” said Adam, “It wouldn’t be good for all those witches and wizards to have heart attacks during duels, would it?” No one could tell if he was joking or not. “So, did you find Sirius Black’s house all right?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “It was a bit dirty, but it was easy to clean using magic.”

“So you’re going to be taking this Knight Bus there every day?” asked Marissa.

“Actually,” said Hermione, “after we got there I made a portkey so we could travel back and forth magically.”

“Portkey?” asked Adam.

“I charmed a necklace so that if you’re touching it and say the right words, it’ll take you to either that house or this one. The charmed object is called a portkey.”

“Wow,” said Adam. “I can’t wait to use it to visit Sirius’ house in a few days.” Harry took a moment to realize the reason Hermione claimed she’d only made one. It went to her bedroom. Harry would be safer if Hermione’s parents didn’t know he had a portkey to her bedroom. He had to make sure that he never let them know about his portkey.

“So,” said Marissa, “Did you see Ron today? Is he going to practice magic with you?”

“Er,” said Harry, “We did see him, but, er, he won’t be studying with us.”

“Oh. Why is that?” asked Adam.

Both parents noticed the exchanged glances between the teenagers, and were pretty sure what it met. “Er, we had a disagreement,” said Harry, his ears turning pink. “He’s mad at us.”

“Oh,” said Marissa, a smile starting to form on her lips, “what about?”

“Er,” said Hermione, her cheeks turning pink, “He’s mad that Harry’s staying here.”

“Why?” asked Adam, joining in on the fun.

“He, er, he’s jealous, I think,” supplied Harry.

“Why?” asked Marissa, smiling.

“Harrldting,” said Hermione eloquently.

“What?” said Adam, obviously holding back laughter.

She took a deep breath and looked at her knees. “Harry and I are dating,” she muttered.

“Oh,” said Adam, “When did this happen?”

“Er, this morning...sir,” said Harry nervously.

“Have you kissed my daughter?” asked Adam with a serious expression on his face, enjoying the way both Harry and Hermione’s faces were changing colors as they squirmed.

Harry swallowed and said, “Er, yes sir.”

“I see. Hermione?”

“Yes,”

“Did he make any unwanted advances on you?”

“No, no he’d never do that!” Hermione answered more confidently.

Adam chuckled now, “I’m sure he wouldn’t.”

The tension eased a bit until Adam said, “Harry, I would like a word with you, though.”

Harry swallowed again. “Er, yes sir.” He reluctantly got up and followed Hermione’s father into his bedroom.

Once the door was closed, Adam said, "I, I don't suppose that the Dursleys have ever spoken to you about, well, girls, have they?"

"Only to say that only a blind one would ever like me," answered Harry truthfully.

"I suppose they think that whale Dudley has the girls lining up to date him."

"That's the lie he tells them," said Harry. "They once asked him why he never has a girl visit the house, so he claimed he can't decide which girlfriend to invite."

"And they believe that?" asked Adam, clearly shocked.

"When it comes to their 'ittle Dudlykins,' they believe anything and everything he says."

"I also suppose that your godfather hasn't exactly been able to have a talk with you about girls either," said Adam.

Harry at this moment finally realized what was about to happen. "Er, no. I don't suppose listening to Seamus and Dean in the dorm talking about the girls they've dated counts either?"

"No Harry, that doesn't count. If they talk about how far they've gone with kissing and such, they are doing a great disservice to their girlfriends that I hope you never do. It looks like I'll have to give you this talk. The first thing I want you to know is that you need to treat your girlfriend with respect. Part of that is not talking about your relationship behind her back, giving her a less than flattering reputation. After the other boys talk about their girlfriends, what did you think of those girls?"

"Er," said Harry, "I thought they sounded, well, loose. Like I wouldn't want to date them."

"You thought they were slags, didn't you?" asked Adam.

"Er, well, yes."

“Well, the first thing you need to know is that a lot of guys lie about how far a girl lets him go, which betters his reputation while worsening hers. If you care at all about a girl, you won’t do that. Don’t ever judge your relationship based off of what other guys say. The way to judge your relationship is by how happy the girl is. That’s the true measure of how good or bad of a boyfriend you are.”

“Yes sir,” Harry said.

Harry surprisingly was enjoying this talk until Adam ruined that by saying, “Now we’ll talk about the actual physical affection, starting with kissing. I know you two did kiss...” At this point Harry’s face went red as they discussed that subject, with Adam’s main focus being that he not push Hermione or treat her with anything but the utmost respect. While he agreed with that ideal, he was really embarrassed talking with his girlfriend’s father about showing her affection. He found himself silently wishing for Death Eaters, or even Voldemort himself, to attack and rescue him from this conversation. “This is pathetic! I’d rather be interrogated by Voldemort than Adam Granger,” he thought to himself.

When they returned an hour after they’d left, he found that Hermione was in her room talking with her mother, so he went to his own room and started reading his book on Magical Transportation, and looked up the chapter on charming brooms. He found it to be extremely fascinating. He was about half way through the chapter when he heard a knock on his door. “Come in,” he said.

The door opened to reveal a blushing Hermione. She stepped forward and closed the door. “Er,” she said, “How did your talk with my dad go?”

“I suppose it wasn’t so bad. He just wanted to make sure I don’t mistreat you. How was your talk?”

“She wanted to make sure I don’t let you mistreat me. She told me not to hesitate to defend myself if you ever get, ‘fresh,’ with me. I assured her that you treat me with respect.”

At that moment, a tiny owl zoomed in through the window and landed on Harry’s shoulder. He took the package that had been attached to

its leg, and the excited owl flew a victory lap around the room. The letter said,

"Hi Harry and Hermione.

It's Ginny. My mum said I could go with you tomorrow morning. She thinks we're visiting Diagon Alley tomorrow, and she thinks that we're just playing muggle games at Hermione's house every Saturday. She's always wanted me to have more friends. Anyway, it might be a good idea to tell me about some games so that if dad interrogates me, I'll have something to tell him. If you don't respond, I'll assume you'll be at my house at eight.

Ginny.

P.S. This is the owl Sirius gave Ron, by the way. His name is Pigwidgeon. Ron calls him Pig."

"Well," said Harry, "that shouldn't be any problem. Let's give Pig a treat and let him go."

"Ok. Maybe you should write Sirius about the floo and ask him to personally invite Ginny so that we don't have to pick her up."

"After we've gone through more of the stuff and made sure that anything dangerous is locked away where she can't accidentally get it and hurt herself. But I guess I'll write Sirius about it now. We can decide when and what to tell Ginny."

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The next day, after their exercise and breakfast, Harry and Hermione portkeyed to Grimmauld Place. From there, they floored to the Burrow, where they met Ginny. Ginny said, "Good morning guys. We'd better portkey before mum comes down and we actually have to let her see us floo to Diagon Alley.

Hermione took off her necklace, and they all grabbed hold of it (why give Ginny blackmail information by showing her Harry's) and Hermione said, "House Two Now."

When they arrived, Ginny looked around the place and said, "It's as roomy as I expected those old family manors to be, but it looks..."

"...Like it hasn't been properly cared for in years?" suggested Hermione. "It hasn't. When Harry and I showed up here for the first time, the place was filthy and stank. I'm just glad we could use our magic to clean it up. It would've taken the whole summer to do it the muggle way."

"I don't know how they live without magic," said Ginny.

"Anyway, after we cleaned up the mess, we found that the carpet and walls are in desperate need for maintenance, but we don't have the time to worry about that. We just made it livable," said Harry.

"I could take care of it," said Ginny, "for the right price."

Harry stared at her for about thirty seconds as she looked him straight in the eyes, grinning. "Are you asking for a job?"

"Yes. I'd like to get some new clothes before school starts just as much as Ron would. The only difference is that he complains but doesn't do anything about it while I try and make some money."

"Well, how much money do you want?" asked Harry.

"Well," said Ginny, "Obviously you're paying for the materials like carpet and paint, or maybe wallpaper in some of these rooms. If I'm doing all the work of coming up with a new 'look' for the house, and doing all the work, I'd like fifty Galleons."

Hermione said, "Thirty."

"Forty-five."

"Thirty-five."

"Ok, Forty Galleons, and that's my final offer," said Ginny.

"Done," said Hermione, "That is, if Harry agrees."

“Yes, for forty Galleons you decorate the place, but make sure not to make it look feminine. It after all does belong to a bachelor. Just one thing. Make sure you’re careful. Some of the objects here may be cursed.”

“All right,” said Ginny, “Could Hermione maybe teach me a spell to detect curses?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “but it would be safer for you not to mess with anything while you’re alone.”

The redhead glared at Hermione. “How am I supposed to get this done if I can only come here for three hours a day?”

Hermione sighed, “I guess I’ll have to make you a portkey. We’ll check on you though, every few hours, just to make sure you’re alright.”

Ginny, who’s cheeks were getting pink, said, “How about if I get my idiot brother to come and baby-sit me?”

“Ginny,” said Harry, “this is not about us thinking you can’t take care of yourself. I wouldn’t want to be here alone until we’re sure nothing’s been cursed. If you get cursed you could end up lying on the floor dying with no one to help you. Why don’t we today instead of our regular studying, go through this house learning and using that spell Hermione mentioned for checking objects for traps or dark magic so that we can declare this place to be safe? I think it would definitely be a valuable learning experience for my goals.”

The other two quickly agreed, and after Hermione had shown them the spell, they started checking objects. They stayed in the same room checking every object in it, and then moved on to the next room. They found that it was a good thing that they checked things for curses. They quickly started finding everything from a blood quill to a book that blinds you if you open it (they didn’t open it). They levitated the objects into a box until it filled up quickly, and then they floored to Diagon Alley quickly and picked up another weightless bottomless trunk. After they’d transferred all the dark objects they’d already found into the trunk, they continued the search. Hermione was making sure to list every object they put in there. They found a locket that seemed

to show more dark magic when tested than all of the other objects combined. Hermione made a special note of that after they'd levitated it into the trunk.

Hermione said, "I think we should ask Professor Dumbledore what to do with these things, and specifically, I'm going to ask about that locket."

"But it's Sirius' stuff!" said Harry. "We can't just give it to Dumbledore!"

"I didn't say to give it away, just ask for advice about it."

"But then we'd be telling him about this place. He might not want us coming here."

"I've got it!" said Hermione. "We'll ask Sirius about this stuff, and ask him to ask Dumbledore about anything he's not sure of, claiming that his house elf told him about it."

"Er," said Harry while he worked out what she'd said, "All right. That wouldn't be going behind Sirius' back."

"Then that's what we'll do," said Hermione. "I just have a bad feeling about that locket. Did you see how much dark magic it had?"

"I did," said Ginny, who'd stayed out of the conversation so far, "and I've got a bad feeling about it, too. But something about it seems, I don't know, familiar somehow, but I don't know how. For some reason it makes me uneasy."

"Alright," said Harry, "but for now can we get back to the search?"

They managed to get through the entire house, with the exception of the attic, in the three hours they'd planned to stay, and Hermione turned a necklace Ginny had worn into a portkey for her (between her room at the Burrow and the living room of Grimmauld Place). They put the trunk in the attic and Hermione magically sealed that room so Ginny couldn't get in there if she wanted to. They left Ginny there to figure out what she needed before going home. The plan was to meet there the next morning to discuss the plans and buy the materials

necessary so Ginny could begin work. Harry and Hermione would then complete whatever studying they could do before their karate class, and then come back to finish their studying.

After they ate lunch at Hermione's house, they went out to the garage and mounted their bicycles. They began pedaling slowly, but soon they were racing each other and enjoying themselves. They arrived at the karate school about ten minutes before their class began and went to their separate changing rooms to put on their karate outfits, and then waited for class to start. As the instructor was just introducing himself to the new class, a brown haired, slightly pudgy boy came rushing in timidly saying, "I'm sorry I'm late, sir, it won't happen again."

The instructor said, "We will excuse tardiness only one time in this summer course without proper justification. Just make sure that it doesn't happen again Mr.?"

"L-Longbottom, sir, N-Neville Longbottom."

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Chapter 6 – Lessons

Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a second after recognizing the new student, but were quickly brought back to the present by the instructor.

“Hello everyone. My name is Mr. Tucker, and I’ll be teaching you basic karate. First of all, I’m going to pass out a white belt to everyone.” He smiled. “You get this for showing up today.” He then passed a handful of white belts to the closest student and continued as they were passed around. “This is an accelerated course designed for kids who go away to boarding school for most of the year. We will be meeting Monday through Friday until the third week of August, after a total of ten weeks. That’s not much time to learn karate, so I expect you to do your best. The order of karate belts varies a bit in different schools, but in this one, the order is white, yellow, purple, green, blue, brown, and black. The white you have now. In three weeks, I will test you all for yellow. If you fail, you’ll have one week to practice on your own and retake the test. Six weeks after that, you’ll be tested for a purple belt. If you pass, you may either practice here for the remaining week or stay home, your choice. Those who fail that test will have that last week to practice with my help. It is my hope that all of you will achieve the purple belt by the end of this course. You will receive a training manual that covers this course’s material at the end of this lesson. There are manuals available for sale here that cover the material for every level, should you desire to continue studying. At the beginning of next summer, you can arrange for an evaluation to determine what level you should study next summer. There’s no reason why everyone who works at it shouldn’t receive your green belt at the beginning of next summer and start working on the blue belt. A few of you might even make the blue belt if you work extra hard, but that’s rare. After you receive the blue belt, it will take more than a year of hard work, most likely two years, to earn a brown belt. After that it will take at least two years, more likely three, for you to earn a black belt. So basically, if you work your butt off all year long while you’re away at school, you might be able to get a black belt in five years. It’s more likely to take you seven years. Let’s get started on lesson one.”

As with everything, the first lesson is always boring, laying the foundations that everything will be built upon. After it was over, Harry and Hermione went to their locker rooms to change. Once he changed, Harry walked up to Neville and said, "Hi Neville. I was surprised to see you here. How's your summer been so far?"

"You were surprised?" said Neville. "What about me? Both you and Hermione are taking this class! I'm surprised Ron wasn't here."

Harry looked a bit uncomfortable. "Well, we had a bit of an argument. Hermione and I told him we were dating..."

"You're dating?" said Neville. "I always had a feeling about you two. Dean, Seamus, and Colin each owe me a Galleon."

"Why?"

"Colin bet you'd date Ron's little sister Ginny first, Seamus bet you'd date the Ravenclaw seeker Cho Chang, and Dean bet you'd date Parvati Patil. I bet all of them that you'd date Hermione first," he said with a smile. "Anyway, what happened with Ron?"

"At first he seemed to be all right with it, but then he found out I was staying at her house and he kind of flipped out. I'm sure he'll get over it."

"Yeah," said Neville. "So am I. He's just jealous. You do know he fancies Hermione, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I got her first. Besides, all Hermione and Ron ever do is argue. We'd better get out there before Hermione comes in here looking for us."

They left the locker room in time to see Hermione purchasing all the books necessary to attain a black belt. Harry walked up to her. "Er, don't you think we could wait a few years on some of those books?"

She looked at him defiantly and said, "It never hurts to read ahead." Then she looked over at Harry's companion. "Hello Neville. It was quite a surprise to see you in class. Why did you decide to join?"

He looked down at the floor. "Er, well on the train, Draco and his goons beat me up again, and I wanted to stop it from happening next year. I know I can't practice you-know-what outside of school, but I can learn to defend myself in some ways here. My Gran didn't really like the idea, but I managed to get her to let me come. Why'd you two take the classes here?"

Harry answered, "I always end up in tight spots, so I thought that I'd like a little help getting out of them. Hermione decided to join me."

"We're dating now," said Hermione blushing. "Did Harry tell you?"

"Yeah. Listen, I've got to go. My Gran'll...."

"Neville," came a call from an old woman with the weirdest looking hat Harry had ever seen. He recognized it immediately from Neville's boggart, but was still shocked to see someone with a bird-hat anyway. "I told you not to talk too much to the other children. You might give away too much information."

"Gran," said Neville as they walked toward the door to meet his grandmother, "This is Harry Potter and Hermione Granger."

Mrs. Longbottom's eyes immediately darted up to Harry's scar. Her face turned a bit pale. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was you. I thought he was talking to muggle children and might accidentally reveal things about our world. Neville has of course told me all about the both of you. You must join us for an early dinner tonight."

Neville looked uncomfortable, so Hermione said, "I'm terribly sorry, but we promised my parents that we'd go straight home. Some other time, perhaps."

"Oh, all right dears. If you've promised your parents something, you should keep your word. I am curious as to why you're here. As I understand it, you're both very good at defending yourself."

"You can't learn too much self-defense," said Harry. "Besides, none of the other wizards can fight hand-to-hand. It gives us the advantage in a fight."

"I suppose you could look at it that way. Neville, I suppose that from now on if I say anything against this class you'll say, 'Harry Potter is taking the class.'"

Neville chuckled, "Yes, I will."

"Well," said Hermione, "It was nice meeting you, but we have to go. Goodbye."

"Yeah," said Harry as Hermione grabbed his hand, "See you later."

After they rode their bikes back to Hermione's house, Harry said, "I wonder why Neville was so uncomfortable around his Gran."

"I don't know, Harry, but it's none of our business. I say we should do some school work for an hour, and then go swimming."

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An hour and ten minutes later, Harry was outside in the swimming pool waiting for Hermione to come out. He realized that he'd never seen his girlfriend in a swimsuit before. For that reason, he was still wearing his glasses. When she finally came out, he wasn't disappointed. She was only wearing a silver one-piece suit, but it did a great job of revealing her almost fifteen-year-old form. Even though he thought she was pretty, he'd never actually thought of her as sexy, hot, or whatever word you use to describe a girl that looks that good. He was very glad that most of him was under water. If he weren't, then he'd have been very embarrassed by the reaction she was causing.

She blushed as she recognized the look in his eyes. She was surprised, though pleased that he was looking at her like that. She decided to make him blush. "I see you like what you see," she said with a smirk, earning the desired result. His whole face turned bright red, and he dunked his head under water for a good fifteen seconds. When he came up for air, he saw that she was now in the water swimming toward him. He took a deep breath and went back under water and swam behind her, and then came up for air and grabbed one of her feet, and started tickling it. He was ready to catch her if she went under water because of this. "Ha-ha-ha-Harry Potter!" she

screamed in between laughs as she tried to get free, “Let-ha-go-ha of me!”

“Only if you kiss me,” he said.

“Ha-fine. Let me go and I’ll kiss you. I promise.”

“Ok,” Harry said, letting her go. She splashed water into his face with her foot and swam off as fast as she could. He yelled, “Liar!” and swam after her.

Harry soon found out that Hermione was the fastest swimmer, probably because she had the pool, although he figured that if the Dursleys had one, his job would be to fill it up one glass from the upstairs bathroom at a time, and then clean it up. He’d never be allowed inside it, and if Dudley were to push him in, he’d get punished for going in the pool and not drowning. When Dudley finally found a way to ruin it, he’d be blamed. So he figured it was best that the Dursleys didn’t have a pool. He pulled himself out of these thoughts, and stopped swimming. He stood where the water just reached his chest and called out, “I give up. You’re a much better swimmer than I am. You look extremely beautiful in that bathing suit, and I would really love to kiss you.”

She turned around to swim back to him, and stopped right in front of him. When she was standing directly in front of him she said, “Have you learned your lesson now? If you want something from me, you ask for it instead of torturing me to get it.” With that said, she put her hands on the back of his head, and pulled him into a passionate kiss. He put his hands in her hair, which he thought looked wonderful all wet like this. She considered turning their kiss into a snog, but decided to wait a little while for that. They’d actually only been together for just over a day, even though it seemed like forever. They could wait a few weeks for their first snog.

When they separated, he didn’t see anything to complain about. He then kissed her on the cheek. He smiled and said, “Thank you. You’re not only the brightest and sexiest witch of your age, but you’re also the best kisser.

She blushed at the compliment, but then decided to give him a hard time. "Just how many girls have you compared me to?" she asked with a smirk. She already knew the answer to that. Neither of them had kissed anyone else.

Harry blushed and said, "Er, well, none. But there'd be no reason to. I already know you're the best."

"Don't ever forget that," she said, and then gave him another quick kiss. "I think it's about time we went back in. My skin is starting to shrivel up."

-

A few hours later, the Grangers came home to find Harry and Hermione sitting at the table together doing homework. Adam said, "I can't wait until I see that demonstration of what you've learned. Maybe we can go there tomorrow."

"No," said Harry, "not tomorrow."

"Why not?" said Marissa.

Hermione smiled at her parents. "The house is being redecorated. We thought we'd make it look nice before bringing you there. We'd hate for a shabby abandoned house to be your first impression of a wizard's home."

"When do you have time for that?" asked Adam.

"Actually, Harry hired someone to do it."

"Oh," said Hermione's mother.

"Yes. You see, Ginny Weasley asked us if she could practice magic at the house with us, and when she saw how it looked, she volunteered to fix it up for a price. Since we didn't have time, and she does need the money, I hired her. Tomorrow we're going to go over her plans and buy the necessary materials."

“Ok,” said Adam, “I guess we can wait until the place looks nicer. Just make sure there’s some comfortable furniture for us to sit on while you put on your magic show. How was that karate class?”

“It was very informative,” said Hermione.

“She bought every book they had,” added Harry, causing her parents to chuckle. “It was a lot of fun, and we saw one of our friends from school there.”

“Really,” said Marissa, smiling, “Is it anyone you’ve told us about?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “Neville Longbottom.”

“The slightly clumsy but goodhearted boy?” asked Adam.

“That would be him,” said Harry.

“You must invite him over for the afternoon one of these days,” said Marissa. “Does he live near here?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “I guess he must if he’s going to that school.”

-

The next morning, Harry and Hermione portkeyed to Grimmauld Place to find Ginny already there, sitting at an old table with five parchments, ink, and a quill. “Good morning guys,” she said brightly, “I’ve come up with my design – red carpet and curtains, and all the walls painted hotpink.”

“What?” said Harry, while Hermione giggled.

“I’m just kidding,” said Ginny. “Here are my ideas.” She then walked them through the house to various rooms, reading her different ideas from the parchments. After they’d settled on what Harry wanted, which included at Harry’s insistence a new door knocker, they went shopping.

They then took the Knight Bus to a store in London that had everything they needed except for the furniture, which they ordered elsewhere to be delivered later that day. Harry started to suggest buying a drop cloth to protect the furniture, but Hermione reminded them that they could simply make everything impervious to the paint (or anything else). After Harry paid for everything, they took their cart to a place no one could see, and then everybody grabbed as much stuff as they could, which was everything. Ginny portkeyed first, followed by the other two. "Harry," said Ginny, "I didn't know you had your own portkey."

He'd forgotten that he wanted to keep that a secret. Inwardly he cursed himself. "We decided it would be better if I had one when we were shopping, so Hermione made me one yesterday at the same time she made yours. She gave it to me after we left yesterday."

"Oh," said Ginny. "I guess I'd better get to work. It's a good thing I can do this magically. Can you imagine how long this would take the muggle way?"

They left Ginny to her work and went to their practice room. After they silenced the door, they started working on their lesson for the day. They had time to get everything but their dueling done. They portkeyed straight out of that room, had lunch, rode their bikes to the karate class and back, and then portkeyed back to find that the living room was completely changed. Instead of threadbare old carpet, it had nice new dark green carpet with tan walls. There were a light brown couch and two matching recliners, along with a beautiful table in front of them. They noticed that the kitchen was similarly decorated. When they got to the next room, they found Ginny with her wand out, making paint float out of open gallons onto the walls.

"You've been doing a great job, Ginny," said Harry. "The living room and kitchen look wonderful. I'd hardly know that it's the same house."

"Thanks! These spells I found in mum's household book work even better than I thought. I should be done with every room by tomorrow night."

"Well, keep up the good work! Hermione and I have some practicing to do."

“What are you practicing?”

“Er, dueling,” said Harry.

“Really?” she said. “Can I practice with you after I finish decorating the house?” When she saw they looked uncertain, she added, “A lot of boys like to take advantage of girls who can’t protect themselves. Malfoy was looking at me a lot toward the end of the year, and it made me very uncomfortable.”

“Fine,” said Harry, “we’ll practice with you, but if Malfoy comes bothering you, let us know. We’ll take care of him!”

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Chapter 7 – Talking to Sirius

That night, a tropical bird arrived in Harry's room at Hermione's house. It had a letter that said,

"Dear Harry,

I've just received your letter that says you took my advice about talking to Hermione, and about Grimmauld Place. As far as the picture of my mother goes, thanks for allowing me to burn the portrait myself. I think it might be a good idea if we can communicate faster than every few days. You may have already written me since the letter I'm responding to. I used to have a set of two-way mirrors that I used to speak with your father through. They're probably in my vault, but you don't have access to it. There's a book that used to be in a desk in the second biggest bedroom called, "Matlock's Magical Means of Communications," that explains the spell. I've got a mirror here that's charmed to respond to, 'Snuffles.' I'll keep that with me. Hopefully you'll get a mirror charmed to work with it soon.

Sirius

P.S. Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, I, Sirius Black invite you to my home at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place."

"Wow," said Harry, after reading the letter. He got up, walked to Hermione's room, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Hermione's voice called through the door.

"Harry, I got a letter from Sirius."

"Really? Hold on a minute. I'm changing."

"Are you sure I can't come in?" asked Harry playfully.

"Positive. Was he just responding to the first letter, or to more than one of them?"

"Just the first. It's got your invitation to the house."

The door opened, revealing Hermione in a light blue pajama outfit.

Harry smiled, "It was worth the wait."

Hermione blushed. "Come in, but don't close the door. I don't want my parents to get the wrong idea."

"Alright," said Harry, stepping into the room. "Here's the letter from Sirius."

He handed her the letter and she read it quickly, smiling as she read. "Brilliant," she said. "I remember testing that book for curses the other day. It's still in the desk. I don't know why I didn't think of it!"

"I guess I know what we'll be doing tomorrow," said Harry. "I still think it's funny that he burned his mum's portrait."

"Can you blame him?" asked Hermione, smirking.

"Not with that woman," he said, "She'd drive him insane. She'd be worse than the dementors."

"I guess so," said Hermione. "If we're getting up at six, we'd better go to bed now."

"Goodnight Hermione," said Harry.

She gave him a quick kiss and said, "Goodnight,"

-

They got up and did their morning exercises, and ended up at Grimmauld Place at 7:45. Ginny wasn't there yet, so they immediately went to the correct bedroom to get the book. When they looked in the bedroom, they saw that Ginny had already redecorated it. It had light brown carpet with light green walls. The queen-size four-poster bed had a dark green blanket over it, with matching bed curtains. There was a wooden desk that appeared to have recently been sanded down and refinished. It was hard to believe it was the same old black desk that they'd seen just a few days ago. Hermione opened the drawer to find...nothing.

“What?” said Hermione, panicking that a book was missing. “It was just here.”

“Relax Mione,” said Harry. “She probably just emptied the desk when she worked on it.”

“But where would Ginny put it?” asked Hermione.

“Put what?” called Ginny’s voice from the doorway.

Harry turned to her and said, “Good morning, Ginny. We were just looking for a book that was in this desk.”

“You mean the magical communications book,” Ginny asked.

“Yes,” said Hermione, almost looking desperate.

“I burned it,” said Ginny, smirking.

“YOU BURNED A BOOK!” screamed Hermione, causing Ginny to start laughing hysterically.

“I’m just kidding, Hermione. I just put it in another room while I was working on the desk. Relax,” said Ginny, causing Harry to start chuckling.

“Do you think it’s funny, Mr. Potter?” asked Hermione.

“I think your reaction is funny, Mione,” said Harry. “It’s just a book. If it was missing, we could buy another one. You were acting like it was the end of the world. Ginny, could you get that book please?”

“Sure, Harry,” said Ginny, still chuckling at Hermione.

“By the way, Ginny, you did a good job on this room, especially that old desk. It looks brand new.”

Ginny blushed, “Thanks. It’s just a matter of finding the right charms.” She left the room.

“Harry, since when are you calling me, ‘Mione?’”

“Since today,” said Harry, “Why?”

“Truthfully, I don’t like it,” she said.

“Then what should I call you, ‘Herms?’”

She chuckled, “No. I happen to like being referred to by my name.”

He sighed, “If that’s what you want, Hermione. That is a pretty name.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione.

“Here’s the book,” Ginny called as she reentered the room.

Hermione grinned broadly and took the book. “Now Harry, you study what we planned while I study this. Hopefully we’ll be able to talk to Sirius soon.”

“Talk to Sirius?” asked Ginny.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “He wants us to make a two-way mirror with information from that book. He’s already got one.”

“I’ll bet you’ll like being able to talk to him, Harry,” said Ginny.

“Yeah, it’ll be great!” said Harry. “Well, I’d better get to studying.”

“And I’ve still got more rooms to do,” said Ginny.

They both left Hermione alone with the book.

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About an hour later, Hermione came bursting into the practice room to find Ginny in there magically painting. “Hi Ginny. Where’s Harry?” she asked.

“I believe Harry is in the kitchen reading.”

“Thanks.” Hermione ran out of the room toward the kitchen.

She saw him sitting on a chair with a book, so she snuck up behind him and put her hands over his eyes. "Guess who?" she said.

"Pansy, oh Pansy how I've missed you!" said Harry, earning a punch in the shoulder from Hermione. "Ouch!" said Harry, chuckling.

"I was going to let you talk to Sirius, but if you want to pretend you're in love with Pansy Parkinson, maybe..."

"Ok, ok. I'm sorry Hermione."

She smiled and produced a small mirror. "Just look at it and say, 'Snuffles'"

He took the mirror and uncertainly said, "Snuffles"

The mirror clouded up, and within a few seconds, Sirius' image appeared in it. "Hi Harry," he said.

"Hi Sirius, it's good to see you," said Harry.

"It's good to see you, too, cub. How have you been doing? Hermione says you're dating now."

Harry blushed, "Er, yeah."

"So, do you, er, have any questions, er about that?" said Sirius uncertainly.

"Actually," said Harry, "Hermione's father gave me, 'the talk' a few days ago."

"Your girlfriend's father? I'll bet you wanted to run away from that."

Harry smiled, "I remember wishing for a Death Eater attack to rescue me from that conversation."

Sirius laughed. "So, anything else I should know about?"

"Well, she and I are enrolled in a muggle karate class. The first day we found out we had class with Neville Longbottom."

Sirius looked surprised, "The same class? That is a coincidence."

"Yeah. By the way, I have Ginny Weasley redecorating the place, you know, new paint and new carpet. She's doing a good job, too."

"Good," said Sirius, "Hopefully it won't look like Voldemort's lair anymore."

"Can we do magic outside the house, or just inside? We'd like to clean up the outside walls."

"Sorry pup, you can only do magic inside. Maybe you can get Remus to do the outside."

"How do I find him?" asked Harry.

"I'll ask Dumbledore," said Sirius. "What else are you learning besides muggle defense?"

-

Harry explained everything that he and Hermione were studying, and chatted with him awhile, eventually having him personally invite Ginny to the house so that the door would open for her. When he asked about the floo, Sirius said that it worked exactly the same as the door. "If you've been invited by me, it'll let you in. Otherwise, you wind up in Diagon Alley. My family thought it was better than having someone trapped on the floo network for the ministry to find. It's a lot funnier if someone keeps trying and trying, and ends up at the Leaky Cauldron every time."

Eventually, Harry had to let go of Sirius to continue his training with Hermione, who informed him that she'd made another mirror for herself. "I told Sirius that your mirror is 'Little Prongs' and mine is 'Hermione Granger.'"

Harry looked at Hermione in disbelief, "Little Prongs? Why couldn't it be like yours?"

She looked at him like he was stupid. "Do you want everyone who knows your name to be able to bother you on your mirror?"

Harry chuckled, "I guess not."

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Chapter 8 – Finishing the House

Because of the time spent with the mirror (not to mention the fact that Ginny had been painting the dueling room at the time), Harry and Hermione didn't get to duel until after their karate class. When they portkeyed back to the house, Ginny was still working on a few rooms, so they didn't bother her. They walked into the dueling room and could barely recognize it. It looked like a gymnasium. The walls were painted white. Instead of carpeted, the burgundy floor was shiny and smooth. There were six folding chairs along the wall on each end of the room. The floor had silver lines on it that made it look like a basketball court, but instead of basketball hoops, at each end were golden quidditch hoops hanging down from the ceiling. The highest hoops themselves were just over five feet in the air. "Wow," said Harry smiling.

"I hope you like it," came Ginny's voice from the doorway. I know you can't have a quidditch pitch here, so I came up with a way the play quidditch without broomsticks. I know you want exercise. As much fun as quidditch is, you're sitting down for the whole game, so you hardly get any exercise." Ginny smirked. "Plus I know how much Hermione hates flying. I figured that when we're not dueling, we could play," she said nervously. "I got you a Quaffle. It's in that corner," she said, pointing at a brand new Quaffle.

Harry beamed at Ginny, "I think that's brilliant! Does Ron know about...Oh yeah." He then looked at Ginny. "Do you think Ron is ready to at least take a look at the place? If only to check this room out?"

"Maybe," said Ginny seriously.

"Then maybe you can go get him after Harry and I are finished dueling. Maybe in an hour?" said Hermione.

"Ok," said Ginny. "I'll try. In the meantime, I've got a few more rooms to finish up before I rob Harry."

Harry chuckled. "Did you manage to find the door knocker that I wanted?"

"No," said Ginny, "so I bought a cheap one and transfigured it to a gold phoenix like you asked. "It was harder to attach it to the door without magic than to redecorate the entire house with magic."

"Thanks," said Harry.

"That's what I'm here for," Ginny said as she turned around and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Harry," shouted Hermione, pulling out her wand, "Defend yourself!" She shouted, "Stupefy," sending a stunner at Harry, who dived out of the way, while pulling his wand out of his back pocket. This was almost always the way their duels began, with one of them taking the other by surprise.

He yelled, "Protego," shielding himself, and then, "expelliarmus," as he pointed his wand at his opponent/girlfriend.

She managed to shout, "protego," shielding herself from the blast. She then ran in his direction, shouting, "expelliarmus," sending more blasts his way. Harry noticed a folding chair behind Hermione, and got an idea. He pointed his wand and quietly muttered, "accio chair."

Hermione aimed her wand at him and shouted, "Stupi...what," as the chair hit her from behind, knocking her backwards onto the chair."

"Petrificus Totalus," shouted Harry, putting his startled opponent into the full body-bind.

He walked up to her stiff but alert body and said, "You look really beautiful," before pointing his wand at her and saying, "Finite incantatum." He held out his hand to help her up. She took it without looking him in the eye.

"That's why I got second place in our defense exams," she muttered. "I thought I'd finally beat you this match. You manage to surprise me. All the spells I know won't help if I'm too shocked to use them." She hung her head down.

"That's why we're practicing, so that by the time we end up in real duels, we'll be ready. I know you don't want me to go easy on you."

"At least you only petrified me," said Hermione. "I'll have to watch out for Ginny once she joins us, probably tomorrow. Ron told me about her favorite hex, and it sounds awful."

"What is it?" asked Harry, curious.

Hermione smiled, "That's for me to know and you to find out. Defend yourself!"

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After five ten-minute duels wherein Harry won all but the fourth one, they had Ginny portkey to the Burrow to ask Ron to join them. Five minutes later, Harry and Hermione heard a crash in the living room, along with Ron's voice saying, "Ouch. Well, Gin, you brought me here. Where's your unusual quidditch pitch?"

"Come and see, Ronald."

Ron tensed up when he saw Harry and Hermione. "Er, hi."

"Hi Ron," said Harry, "What do you think about the indoor quidditch pitch your sister designed?"

"It looks good," said Ron, "but the ceiling's too low to ride a broom in here."

"That's why you don't ride the brooms in here," said Ginny. "That's why I called it, 'broomless quidditch.' Obviously it's better if you have a full quidditch pitch, but you have to make due with what you have."

"Er, I guess so," said Ron.

"Do you want to play a game, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"I, er, I suppose," said Ron.

Harry pointed his wand to a corner and said, "Accio Quaffle," causing it to come.

"Wow," said Ron, "I didn't know you could summon things, Harry. I thought we weren't learning that spell until next term."

“He learned that spell here, Ronald,” said Hermione, “because believe it or not we actually have been practicing magic here.”

“Ok,” said Ron, “Fine. You’ve been learning new spells here.”

“Let’s start the game,” shouted Harry, stopping an argument from starting.

They played the game for about an hour. The teams were Harry and Hermione against Ron and Ginny. Harry and Ginny played chasers while Ron and Hermione were keepers. Harry would steal the Quaffle from Ginny, who would steal it from Harry, who would steal it from Ginny. Finally Harry threw the ball at the right hoop. Ron caught it and tossed it to Ginny, who immediately got it through the hoops Hermione was unsuccessfully trying to guard. The game went on for about an hour, after which both Harry and Ginny were exhausted from having been running almost the whole time. The score was one-hundred to eighty. Harry’s team lost, mainly because Hermione wasn’t a very good keeper.

Ginny announced, “I’ve got one more room I have to finish before getting paid,” and walked off, saying, “Maybe you two can give Ron a tour.”

Reluctantly, Ron went around the house looking at what his sister had done. He said, “It does look nice, even if it is Slytherin colors.” Ron especially liked to picture of a Hungarian Horntail dragon that Ginny had replaced the portrait of Mrs. Black with (she’d put the canvas with the dragon over the cut canvas and ‘repaired’ it). While the dragon was moving, it was blessedly silent. Ron said, “I wonder why Ginny picked a horntail.”

“She said it was about the most dangerous breed out there,” said Harry.

“Sounds like a reason she’d pick it,” said Ron

“She also liked the color,” said Hermione.

“But she knew she was replacing the portrait of a dragon-lady,” said Harry.

Before anyone could respond, they heard Ginny scream from inside a nearby room. Ron was closest, and ran into the room, followed quickly by Harry and Hermione.

Harry first noticed that a painting of what appeared to be cupid was lying on the floor. He looked at Ginny's eyes, which seemed in a daze, as she stared at Ron. Harry wasn't positive, but it appeared to Harry that Ginny was looking at her brother in a way that sisters shouldn't.

"Hello, Ron," Ginny said, batting her eyelashes at her brother, "did I mention how nice you look today?"

Harry looked at Ron, who appeared very scared as Ginny sexily walked up to her brother. She put her hand on his face and he bolted out of the room, appearing to Harry like he was about to either throw up or have a heart attack. Harry started laughing loudly.

"This isn't a laughing matter, Harry," hissed Hermione. "Ginny has obviously been bewitched with something similar to a love potion, probably from touching that portrait of cupid!"

"Then why didn't we detect it when we scanned to place?" said Harry.

"We were scanning for dark magic, not love spells," said Hermione.

At that moment, they heard Ron yelling for help. Harry started chuckling, "Ha-how do we help? Ha ha..."

Hermione took a deep breath. "I can try finite incantatum," she said, marching down the stairs as fast as she could go.

Harry slowly followed her down the stairs, doing his best not to laugh. When he got to the dining room, he saw Ron standing on top of the table doing his best to stop Ginny from joining him. He looked like he was ready to cry.

Hermione said, "It didn't work."

"Can't you just stupefy her?" Harry asked.

"We don't know exactly what's gotten her," said Hermione, "Mixing certain spells together can be disastrous."

"So what are we gonna do?" asked Harry, biting his lip to avoid laughing at the way Ginny kept lunging at her brother and he'd keep pushing her away.

"I don't know; this is Sirius'...that's it! I'll call Sirius!" she said excitedly. She quickly pulled a compact out of her pocket, opened it and said, "Snuffles," to the mirror.

"Yes, Hermione," Harry heard Sirius' voice a few seconds later.

"Well, er, Ginny was in a room and we think she touched a painting of cupid and..."

Sirius chuckled, "She's acting like she's just taken a love potion?"

Hermione said, "Yes."

"Who's she after? Harry?" Sirius asked with mirth in his voice.

"Er no. Actually, she's after her brother, Ron."

Sirius actually started laughing out loud at this information.

"Sirius! This is a serious matter, seriously," said Hermione, "It's not funny!"

"You're right, it's not funny," Sirius said, "It's bloody hilarious!" Harry started laughing with his godfather at that.

"Maybe one of us was adopted," shouted Ginny over the conversation, "Maybe we're not really related after all! I know you think I'm pretty!"

"Help!" squeaked Ron as he continued to fight off his sister's advances.

Sirius chuckled, "That was funny! You'll have to show me that memory in a pensieve!"

"Sirius," shouted Hermione, "How do we cure her?"

Sirius was still chuckling, "If you insist on stopping it, there's a potion in the loo cabinet that says, 'Anti-Cupid.' You'll have to get her to swallow it. Otherwise she'll be in love with her brother for twenty-four hours."

Hermione ran to the loo and pulled open the cabinet. She had no problem finding the potion. She went back downstairs and found that Ginny had finally managed to get on the table. Ron jumped off of it and ran away. Ginny jumped down and was running after him until Hermione shouted, "Ginny! I know why Ron is avoiding you!"

Ginny stopped in her tracks. Timidly she said, "Y-You do? Aren't I pretty enough? Is it my freckles?"

"Oh no," said Hermione, "He loves your freckles. It's your breath."

"What?" said Ginny, horrified.

"Yes," said Hermione grimly, "I'm afraid you've got really bad breath, what muggles call, 'halitosis.' The good news is that if you drink this potion, you'll have good breath."

"And Ron will love me?" said Ginny, with a wide smile on her face.

"Definitely. The potion will taste bad, but once you've swallowed it all, everything will be fine." Hermione handed Ginny the potion, which she drank greedily.

"Ok, I've drunk it! Ron, here I....What! Oh my God!" Her face turned completely pale and she ran into the nearest unoccupied room and slammed the door behind her.

Hermione shouted, "Ron, it's safe! You can come out now!" She then said, "Harry, why don't you levitate that picture to the attic while I try talking to Ginny?"

"All right, love."

Harry went back to that room and pointed his wand at the infamous painting. He levitated it up another set of stairs, and finally into the attic with the cursed objects. Before opening the attic door, he had to

state the password Hermione had set to unlock it. When he came back downstairs, he saw Ginny was no longer hiding in a room, but her head was down.

"How are you feeling, Ginny?" he asked.

"Humiliated," she said without looking up. "I know you had a good laugh over it."

"Ginny, I didn't mean any harm by laughing. The situation did look funny, that's all. Picture if I'd touched the portrait, and was chasing Ron all over the house."

She started chuckling, "I, I guess I must have looked funny, chasing after my brother."

Harry chuckled too, "Actually, Ron looked even funnier. I thought he was gonna have a nervous breakdown."

She looked up at Harry and laughed. At that moment, Hermione called, "Harry, we've got to get back home."

"I'll be right down," Harry called back. He then turned back to Ginny. "I've taken the portrait away so you can finish the room. You've been doing a wonderful job here. Here's the forty Galleons I owe you, and an extra five as a tip. Don't tell Hermione about the five." He pulled a change pouch out of his pocket and gave it to her. "It's all there, you can count it."

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That evening at supper Marissa Granger said, "When will that house be ready so we can watch your magic show?"

"It's probably ready right now," said Harry, "When we left, Ginny had only one more room to take care of."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger's faces lit up. "Then could we go there tomorrow after your karate class?" asked Adam. "We have a free afternoon tomorrow and Friday."

“Sure,” said Hermione, “We’ll try to show you some interesting magic, and if there’s anything I’ve told you about that we don’t demonstrate, be sure to ask us while we’re there.”

“We will,” said Marissa.

“When are you going to invite that friend of yours, Neville here?” asked Adam.

Hermione said, “Er, I don’t know...”

“Why not invite other people, like the Weasleys, here, too. Have a party of sorts. This Friday afternoon. We can pick you and Neville up at the karate school. We’ll order pizza for everyone.”

“Ok,” said Hermione, “sounds like fun!”

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Chapter 9 – Practicing Magic

The next morning, Harry and Hermione showed up at Sirius' house at exactly eight o'clock. They were a bit surprised to find Ginny there.

"Good morning, Ginny," said Harry. "I guess you're here to practice your hexes until we start dueling at ten."

"Er, actually," said Ginny nervously, "I was kind of hoping you'd let me join your training. I mean, I'm already sworn to secrecy. It wouldn't hurt for me to learn extra skills."

Harry said, "What do you think, Hermione?"

"I don't suppose it'll do any harm, love." Hermione then turned to Ginny. "We're studying something different every day of the week. Here's our list. Today we're studying becoming animagi. It's supposed to take a year to complete that. We'll be continuing with this at Hogwarts. We should get through a few of the other subjects within a month and change to new ones."

"Animagus training?" said Ginny, "That sounds exciting! I've always wanted to be able to become an animal! It's too bad it takes a year, but oh well. How will we begin?"

They sat next to each other (with Hermione in the middle) and together read the first chapter. When they were finished, Harry said, "Wow. Maybe we should call Sirius to see how the Marauders began their training. He'll probably have a few tips."

"Sirius?" said Ginny, looking surprised. "Is he an animagus?"

"Yes, he, along with my dad and Peter Pettigrew, became illegal animagi while still at Hogwarts."

"Wow," said Ginny, clearly impressed.

Harry pulled out his small mirror and said, "Snuffles."

"Hello, Harry," said Sirius when he appeared. "How are you doing?"

“All right. We just read the first chapter of an animagus book, and were wondering if you had any tips or advice about how to learn to transform.”

After Sirius had talked for over an hour, describing the way he had prepared for the first step, which included practicing some meditative techniques to prepare for the magical meditation to learn your form. They hoped to be able to do it in a week, but Sirius said that it would take at least two weeks of practicing daily meditation for an hour before they could achieve the proper state to learn their animal.

When they were finished with that conversation, they all walked to the dueling room. Harry said, “It’s everyone for him or herself. The way to win the duel is to either incapacitate or disarm everyone else. Defend yourself. Petrificus Totalus!” Harry aimed that first hex at Ginny, who barely dodged in time.

She got mad from that cheap shot and shouted, “Bates Mocus!” while pointing her wand at Harry.

Harry didn’t notice what Ginny was doing, because at the time, he was pointing his wand at Hermione, preparing to curse her. When he was hit by Ginny’s hex, he felt the weirdest sensation of his life as his own bogies were pulled out of his nose and turned into little bats that started attacking his head. He heard Hermione’s amused voice shout, “Petrificus Totalus,” and he soon found himself lying stiff on the ground unable to move while being attacked by mucus bats. The duel continued with the two girls fighting each other furiously, with them each dodging the other’s hexes.

Finally Hermione saw an opportunity to use a strategy Harry had previously used on her. Ginny was directly between Hermione and a folding chair. “Accio, chair,” Hermione muttered, causing the chair to run into Ginny from behind.

Ginny made herself fall to the ground to avoid the ‘stupefy’ spell that Hermione sent the moment the chair made contact, but was unable to get up fast enough to escape the ‘expelliarmus’ curse that immediately followed.

Finally, after ten minutes of lying on the ground being tortured by bat bogies, Harry was released from his hexes by Hermione. His face was red and the girls were laughing at him, but the only thing he said once he got up was, "Defend yourself."

This time, he avoided Ginny's hexes and in fact did manage to petrify her and eventually stupefy Hermione.

After a few more duels, which got longer and longer as all of them improved, Hermione said, "Harry and I have got to go now. Bye Ginny."

"Bye guys," said the redhead.

"By the way," said Harry, "we're bringing Hermione's parents here for a bit of a magic show this afternoon. They've been anxious to actually see Hermione do magic ever since we told them about the place. We made them wait until you were done so they could see what a wizarding house should look like. You can stay and help if you'd like, or you can make sure to avoid them. It's up to you."

Ginny said, "You know, I never thought about it. Muggle parents send their kids to school to learn magic, but never actually get to see what their kids learn. I'd love to be part of your show."

"Yeah," said Hermione, "Oh, and while I'm thinking about it, we're having a small party at my house tomorrow at two-thirty. You, and I suppose Ron, are invited."

"I'd love to go. I'll ask Ron later tonight. I guess we'll need my mum's permission. How about if I let you know tomorrow morning?"

"Ok. We hope you can come."

-

The couple left Ginny, after planning out the magic show, and went home for lunch, and then rode their bikes to the karate class, where they learned a method of blocking a punch. After class, Hermione told Neville, "We're having a small party at my house tomorrow after class, and we'd like you to come."

Neville looked surprised, “Y-You would?”

“Of course we would, Neville,” said Harry. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“My parents will be picking us up, and you can ride home with us. We can get you home from there. You are on the floo network, right?” Harry stared at Hermione blankly from behind Neville, afraid she was going to tell him about Sirius’ house.

“Of course, but I didn’t think that muggle houses were?”

“My house isn’t, but Ginny has a portkey to her house. You should be able to leave with her and Ron, and then floo home from there,” said Hermione. Harry appeared relieved.

At that moment, Neville’s gran walked up and Hermione told her about the party. The older woman seemed happy that Neville was invited and assured them he could go. As they were leaving, Hermione said, “Bye the way, we’ll probably use the swimming pool so bring swimming trunks.”

Neville paled at that, but his grandmother said, “I’ll make sure he doesn’t forget them.”

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When they got home, they were met by Hermione’s parents, who seemed extremely excited about the magic show they were about to witness. Her dad said, “When do we leave?”

“Er, now, if you’re ready?” she answered. When her parents both nodded, she took off her necklace and said, “grab onto this, and don’t let go until we’re there.” When Harry, Marissa, and Adam were holding the necklace, Hermione said, “House Two Now.”

Her parents seemed startled by the feeling of traveling by portkey, but held on as they were instructed. When they landed at Sirius’ house, Adam said, “That was weird. But it was also fast. Do you think you could make a portkey between our house and our office?”

Before Hermione could answer, four glasses of tea floated at them. Ginny said from the kitchen, "Hello. I thought you might be thirsty. These glasses of iced tea are charmed to always be cold, so there's no rush to drink them."

The four of them took the glasses out of the air. Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed very impressed as they were led to the living room, where they were seated on the two recliners.

Hermione stood in front of them nervously and said, "Er, the first things I'd like to show you are some transfiguration examples. I picked up these rocks today on the way home. Now observe." She set four rocks out of a sack she'd brought with her down in front of her parents, said the proper incantation, and they turned into a set of glass goblets with a rose sculpted on one side and a styled 'G' sculpted on the other side. She then placed another rock on the floor and transfigured it into a silver case for the set of glasses. She then put the glasses in the case and handed it to her parents.

"That's amazing," said Marissa.

Hermione sat down and Harry stood up and said, "I'm not as good as Hermione, but I hope you like this." He then took a rock out of the bag and turned it into a thin glass vase. He then pointed his wand at the vase and water filled it. He then took another rock and transfigured it into a carnation. He then put the flower in the vase and handed it to Mrs. Granger.

"Incredible," said Mr. Granger.

Marissa simply said, "Thank you, Harry."

Harry sat down and Ginny got up. She said, "I'm a year behind them, so this might not be as impressive." She then transfigured two rocks into gold cufflinks in the shape of the Gryffindor lion logo and handed them to Adam.

"Wow!" he said as he examined them.

"Just don't tell anybody what that logo is," said Hermione, smiling as she got up. "Now, we'll demonstrate charms. I'll show you a

summoning charm. Ginny put one of my books in one of the bedrooms. I don't know which. Accio, animagus book." Moments later, the book in question came floating into Hermione's hand. She sat down.

Harry then stood up and said, "I'd like to demonstrate the cheering charm. It will make you feel happy with no side affects. Which one of you will volunteer?"

Hermione's parents looked at each other, and then Mrs. Granger said while smirking, "I'll be the brave one. You may charm me." After Harry had successfully charmed his girlfriend's mother, Ginny got back up.

"For my charm, I'll need the room to be a bit darker." After the lights were dimmed, Ginny said, "Lumos maximus," lighting up the room with her wand.

"Excellent," said the still cheerful Marissa Granger.

After Ginny had sat back down, Hermione got up and said, "I would demonstrate cleaning charms, but right now this place is spotless. Is there anything you'd like to see?"

After about a half hour, they'd demonstrated her parents' requests. They then decided to let Ginny give a grand tour of the house. She proudly showed a study saying, "This had threadbare black carpeting with old gray paint and a black desk when I came in here." It now had pine green carpet, wallpaper that showed scenes of a forest, and a beautiful wooden desk that looked like it had just been polished. There were wizard pictures of various big cats, one on each wall. The one on the wall facing the desk had a lion and lioness together. Another depicted a cougar, and another a panther, and the last was a tiger. "With magic, it took about a half hour to do everything in this room."

The walls in another room were painted a very light shade of grey. There was a wizard picture on each wall depicting a scene of Hogwarts. One was the image of Hogwarts, as seen from the boats first years ride on. You could even see the backs of the students in a boat. The opposite wall contained the image of the forbidden forest, another the Great Hall, packed with students and staff, waving merrily,

and the last picture was the Gryffindor common room. The floor had grey carpet. The Grangers were really interested in those pictures, once they knew what they were. It had a grayish marble table in it with comfortable grey office chairs surrounding it.

“The other rooms were kind of boring,” said Ginny. “They’re bedrooms, and I don’t know about you, but I have trouble sleeping in a room with a picture moving around watching me.”

After they’d finished the tour Ginny portkeyed to the Burrow, leaving the rest to talk for a few minutes before returning home. Adam said, “Wow. This home truly is impressive. Ginny did a great job.”

“I know,” said Harry.

“What I can’t believe is that you could do all that magic, and you’re not halfway done with your education,” said Marissa. She was still a bit cheerful, but the charm was wearing off.

“I guess we should be headed home,” said Adam.

“All right,” said Hermione, taking off her necklace.

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When they arrived in Hermione’s bedroom, her father said, “I’m glad Harry doesn’t have a portkey here.”

Hermione said, “I chose my bedroom because is the least likely room in the house to be occupied when I’m not here. You may want to make sure to keep my door closed when I’m not here, in case we have guests.”

“That reminds me,” said Marissa, “How many people are we having over tomorrow?”

“We won’t know for sure until tomorrow morning. Ginny has to ask her parents,” Hermione answered.

-

The next day when Harry and Hermione were preparing to go to Grimmauld Place, Hermione grabbed three brand new brooms that were in her room. "What are they for?" asked Harry. "We magically clean that house."

"Today we're studying magical travel," said Hermione with a grin, "and since you can take the chapters of that book in any order you want, I've decided that we'll start with charming brooms to fly."

"That's great!" said Harry excitedly. "I've already read that chapter, and have been dying to try that out! It's a lot more complicated than I thought, but I'll bet you'll make yours better than my firebolt before we're done today."

"I doubt that," said Hermione honestly, "but I hope we'll all be able to make a broom that flies properly."

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When they arrived, Ginny said, "Ron and I will be coming, and Fred and George would to come as well."

Hermione said, "That should be fine as long as they remember that they can't do magic."

Harry then told Ginny the topic of study for the day, and she was even more excited than he was. "Maybe I can learn to make a broom better than the old ones my family has," she said.

They all were very diligent with this lesson, and two hours later, they all were riding functional, if slow, brooms around the dueling room. Hermione said, "We'll continue this lesson next week. It seems the speed charms are the most challenging to master, but they're also the most important. What's the point in charming a broom to escape on if you can be caught by someone on foot? I suggest we leave the brooms here. We'll engrave our initials on them so we don't get them confused. For now I suggest we start dueling."

Before anyone could react, Harry said, "Hold on, my mirror is being called."

He pulled it out of his pocket, and Sirius' image said, "Hi Harry. I thought I'd let you know that I talked to Dumbledore about the dark objects in the attic. He wants to examine them all, but he's especially interested in that locket. I suggested telling you about this place so you could bring him the stuff, but he was completely against you knowing about this house. I've asked Remus come here tomorrow for it while you're here. He promised to keep our little secret from the headmaster. I just thought I'd let you know."

"Well, thanks for telling us. We'll give him the tour of the house. Maybe we can get him to clean the outside while he's here," said Harry. "I'd love to talk some more, but there are two females here very anxious to hex me. I can't keep them waiting."

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The adult Grangers were home when the two teenagers arrived back from Grimmauld Place, and suggested that they simply drop the two of them off at the karate school today, and that they could portkey back home with Neville. They agreed with the suggestion, so after the karate lesson, Harry, Hermione, and Neville found a secluded spot where no one could see them and portkeyed to the Granger residence. Hermione made a show of giving Harry her portkey so he could go get the Weasleys, who had gone with Ginny to Grimmauld Place (the twins didn't know whose house it was – only that it was a friend of Harry's).

When Harry and the four youngest Weasleys arrived at Hermione's house, they immediately got changed into their swimming trunks and walked out to the pool. Neville seemed nervous about getting into the water, and Ginny noticed. She walked up to him and asked, "D-Do you know how to swim?"

"Er," he said, turning to look at her, noticing her bathing suit and blushing, "Not very well. My gran made me take some swimming lessons, but I really only learned to float."

"If you'd like, I could help you learn," offered Ginny, "I swim at a pond near my house all the time."

Neville looked surprised. "Really? You'll help me?"

“Of course, Neville. You are a ‘fellow Gryffindor,’ aren’t you?”

While the others swam and played in the pool, Ginny spent the time teaching Neville how to properly swim, and by the time they were called in for pizza, he had the basics down pat. He wasn’t ready for the Olympics, but he wasn’t nervous anymore, at least not until the twins got him to eat a canary crème during dinner.

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Chapter 10 – Occlumency Lessons

The twins had set a tray of desserts next to the pizza on the table at the Granger's residence when no one was looking. Neville was the first one to grab and eat a canary crème, and immediately changed into a bird. Ginny immediately turned on Fred and George, who were laughing hysterically. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM!" she shouted, "CHANGE HIM BACK!"

"Well, little sister," said Fred, "You seem to really care..."

"What happens to Neville," said George. "Is it possible..."

"That you're both lovebirds?" finished Fred with a grin.

Ginny's face was red as she faced them, "If I could only use magic here..."

"Relax, Ginny," said George.

"Neville will be changing back..." said Fred.

"any second now," said George as with a pop the canary was replaced by Neville, who now looked terrified.

His face was red and he looked down at the floor as he muttered, "I-I guess I should've eaten the pizza first."

Everyone laughed at this statement, but Ginny kept watching Neville after that. He was very quiet and had been very nervous about eating. They played some muggle video games, which Ron in particular had loved after Harry had shown him how to play, although he claimed quidditch and wizard's chess were still better. Neville didn't really get into the games because he kept glancing at the twins as though afraid they would do something else to him. When it came time for Ginny to portkey home, after she had Neville, Ron, and the twins holding her necklace, she called out the command to go to Grimmauld Place instead of the Burrow. Before anyone could react, she had bat-bogey hexed both Fred and George, and shouted, "That was for what you did to Neville!"

While the twins were fighting mucus bats, Neville said, "Ginny, you shouldn't have done that. Now you'll be in trouble with the ministry for underage magic."

Ginny grinned, "No I won't. Magic can't be detected here."

Neville looked shocked, "Whose house is this?"

Ginny's ears went pink. She didn't want to give away any secrets. "A friend of Harry's. That's all I can tell you. You can floo home from the fireplace." Neville flooed home, and Ginny released Fred and George from her hex. Before they could retaliate, she'd pulled out her portkey and had them grab on.

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The next morning, which was a Saturday, Harry and Ginny arrived at Grimmauld Place at 7:45 a.m. for their first occlumency lesson. Hermione said, "Do you think we should get the trunk out of the attic for Professor Lupin?"

"I suppose so," said Harry, and so they walked hand-in-hand toward the attic and released the charms protecting it.

Hermione levitated the painting out of the way and asked, "Should we put this in the trunk?"

Harry chuckled, "No. We know what it does, and we have the cure. I may even want to use it on someone as a joke sometime. Maybe Filch."

Hermione shook her head, "What? You can't be serious! Maybe I should give it to Professor Dumbledore!"

"Sirius isn't concerned about it, so giving it to Dumbledore would be stealing!"

"So would taking it to Hogwarts," replied Hermione.

Harry chuckled, "Not if I got Sirius' permission."

Hermione paled, knowing that the marauder would definitely approve of her boyfriend's planned prank.

"Permission for what?" asked Ginny, who had just arrived. "What are you doing with that painting?"

Harry said, "Permission to take this painting to Hogwarts and leave it somewhere for Filch to find it."

Ginny burst out laughing. "As long as I'm not the first person he sees!"

"It's not funny," claimed Hermione, although it was obvious that she was trying very hard to stop herself from laughing.

"Come on," said Harry, "Imagine him chasing McGonagall."

"Or Malfoy?" suggested a giggling Ginny.

At that point Hermione lost control and started laughing heartily. After a couple minutes, she said, "Harry, you'd better levitate the trunk to the living room, and I'm putting the painting back in the attic. Then we need to start our lesson."

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They had studied the first chapter on occlumency for about an hour, and were silently trying to clear their minds and put up mental shields. Hermione suddenly yelled in frustration, "This is impossible! How can you know if you're doing this right without a legilimens to test you?"

"Maybe we should try learning legilimency first," suggested Harry.

"But that'll take months," said Hermione, "and there'll be no way to know how well we're doing until we can actually read someone's thoughts. We could waste months doing it wrong and not even know it!"

At that moment, they heard a knock on the door to the house. Harry walked up to it and opened it. He smiled and shook the hand of the man who stood before him. "It's good to see you, Professor Lupin!"

Remus walked inside and said, "It's good to see you, too, Harry," and then looked around and added, "You too, Hermione and Ginny. But as I'm no longer your teacher, you can all just call me Remus." After the girls had greeted Lupin, he said, "Sirius said he'd tell you why I'm here."

"Yes," said Hermione, "The trunk is right over there." Hermione pointed toward the trunk.

"Good," said Lupin, "I understand that you've been doing some studying here."

"Yes, Prof, I mean Remus," said Harry, unsure of exactly what Sirius had told Lupin. "It's good to have a place we can practice magic."

"Yes, I'd imagine so. If you need any help with anything, just let me know."

"Actually," said Hermione, "You may be able to help. Do you know legilimency and occlumency?"

Remus' eyebrows raised. "Er, yes. You're studying that?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Let's just say that we don't want anyone to be able to read our minds."

"You do realize that I'd have to read your minds to teach you?" asked Lupin.

"Er," said Hermione, "I know that it's necessary. That's why we need an instructor to help us. Without someone trying to read our minds, we'll have no idea if we're doing it right. I think we can trust you." Harry and Ginny both nodded. "Will you agree to keep anything you may learn in the strictest of confidence?"

"Of course," said Lupin, sincerely.

"Then can you teach us? Our plan is to study it every Saturday from eight to ten, but if another time would be more convenient for you, I'm sure we can come up with times that'll work."

Lupin smiled, "That time will work fine, except when my furry little problem comes up, and then no time will work. Fortunately, that won't be for three weeks. Hopefully by then you'll be able to practice one week without me. We should be done by the end of the summer. What else have you been learning?"

"Duelling, Animagus training, charming brooms to fly..." said Harry.

"Here's our schedule," said Hermione, pulling a paper out of her pocket.

"Very good," said Lupin as he read, "Wordless, wandless? Anyone can learn nonverbal spell-casting if they can concentrate, but very few people learn wandless magic."

"Everyone does wandless accidental magic before they even get their Hogwarts letter. I personally did quite a number on my Aunt Marge last summer when she got me mad by talking about my parents. All we want to learn is how to control it. I think the ministry wants us dependant on wands so that they can threaten to snap ours. I for one will do whatever I have to so that I'm not dependant on a wand that can be easily dropped in a duel," said Harry.

"With wandless magic mastered," said Hermione, "no one will be able to disarm us."

"Why magical travel?" asked Lupin. "I know that's where charming brooms comes in."

Hermione answered, "So that we can escape if we need to. Try and capture me."

Remus got up and went toward Hermione while she muttered something under her breath. Before he reached her chair, she had disappeared. Remus looked amazed. "She can't apparate already, can she?"

"Not yet," said Harry, "but we'll learn that. Hermione's wearing a necklace that she made into a two way voice activated portkey. She went home, but she'll be back any second."

“What do you think?” asked Hermione, as she arrived back in the room.

“Very useful,” said Remus. “I hadn’t thought of that, but it can be useful to know those skills. I should tell you in advance that the wards of Hogwarts don’t allow portkeys not made by Professor Dumbledore and a few select people to work within the castle walls, so don’t try using them while you’re there. What’s this magical potential?”

“We’re studying a book on unlocking magical potential that talks about magical exercises we can do to fully utilize the magic within us so that our spells can be more powerful,” said Hermione.

“I’ve heard of that,” said Lupin, “but I’ve never known anybody that tried it. Let me know how that goes.”

“Of course,” said Harry.

Lupin sighed, “I know your schedule said to study occlumency from eight to ten, but would you mind studying it for two hours starting now?”

“That’s fine with me,” said Ginny. Harry and Hermione nodded. Since they didn’t have karate class that day, they weren’t in a hurry.

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After two hours of Lupin weakly assaulting their minds (one at a time) and gradually increasing the power of his attacks as they learned to resist his mind probing, they all had slight headaches. Lupin said, “You’ve all done very well. I’ll meet you here next week at eight.”

“Actually,” said Harry, “Maybe we should duel first on Saturdays, and have the occlumency lessons from nine to ten if that’s alright with everybody.”

Everybody, including Lupin, nodded. “I certainly understand not wanting to duel after an occlumency lesson. By the way, don’t forget to clear your minds every night. It’ll help. Do you mind if I observe your dueling practice?”

“Not at all, Pr-Remus,” said Hermione, “Any suggestions you might have would be appreciated.”

“So you know, we try to simulate an attack, not a formal duel,” said Harry. “If a leftover Death Eater were to attack me in Hogsmeade, I doubt he’d bow and count to three before the attack begins.”

“Very wise,” said Lupin, and he followed them into the dueling room.

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They managed to do alright, despite their slight headaches, mainly because they’d been doing a lot of dueling for the past few days. After Remus watched their duels and gave them some compliments and advice, he left with the trunk of dark objects.

When Remus was gone, Harry said, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m starving. Hermione, are you ready to go home?”

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Chapter 11 – Appearances

After they'd eaten lunch, Hermione said to Harry, "We should work on homework for a few hours, and then enjoy the rest of the day."

"Alright," said Harry, and they both left the table and went upstairs. Harry said, "I've got to do some divination homework, and I know you don't have that subject, so I'll be in my room."

"Why are you taking that rubbish?" asked Hermione.

Harry sighed, "It's not entirely rubbish, Hermione."

Hermione's ears went pink, but she looked determinately into her boyfriend's eyes. "Maybe it's possible to have glimpses of the future like Sirius talked about and you witnessed during your final exam. The only trouble is that it had nothing to do with a tea leaf or a crystal ball or any of that rubbish Professor Trelawney talks about! While the concept of seeing into the future may not be entirely rubbish, the methods you learn in the subject are!"

Harry frowned. "You know, you're right. I was just beginning to think that there might be something to the subject, but that's exactly right. She wasn't using any of that stuff! I wish I could drop the subject, but then I wouldn't have enough subjects for my classes. Why did I have to sign up for the same classes as Ron last year?"

"I'm sure that Professor McGonagall would allow you to switch subjects. She'd understand you wanting to stop taking divination."

"But I wouldn't be able to, Hermione," said Harry aggravated, "I'm a year behind in every subject I could take!"

"I could teach you," said Hermione calmly.

Harry gazed at her. "A year's worth of lessons in a few months. I know you're brilliant and could handle that, but I'm not."

"First of all Harry, I don't think I'm so much smarter than you! You just don't apply yourself in anything but defense. Secondly, I didn't say I could teach you everything. I could teach you enough to pass one of

the final exams I took a few weeks ago, and then help you during the year to catch up on anything we missed. If you'll write Professor McGonagall, I'm willing to do it. Just pick the subject. Since I'm not continuing muggle studies, I won't be able to help you much next year, so that leaves ancient runes and arithmency."

"Truthfully," said Harry, "I don't have a clue what either one of those subjects even is."

"Well," said Hermione, "Arithmency is a type of wizard math..."

"Math? No thanks," said Harry.

"Then ancient runes it is," said Hermione enthusiastically. "It's really fascinating, Harry. You get to learn how wards were created to protect special locations like the pyramids! You can even learn to create wards yourself. I'm sure you'll like it once we get past the basics!"

Harry smiled. "I know I'll enjoy watching how excited you get talking about it. All right. I'll write a letter to McGonagall to see if she'll approve. She'll probably make me take a test to get in the class."

Hermione beamed at her boyfriend. "All right, send that letter, and then we'll get my book from last year."

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About fifteen minutes later, Harry had just sent Hedwig out with his letter, and the young couple was entering the Granger library.

"Remember how I told you that my magic books were hidden?" asked Hermione with a smirk.

"Yes," said Harry. "I guess you're gonna show me where now."

"Uh-huh," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him to the wall opposite the door. "Come on."

She pulled him to a picture of a pyramid in the corner of the room and put her right hand on it and said, "Magnum Opus." The entire wall

disappeared, leaving the painting floating in place in mid-air. Several more bookshelves filled with magic books were revealed. Harry noticed a bunch of symbols he didn't recognize written on the newly revealed wall exactly where the extra wall had been. Hermione said, "That means, 'good work,' in Latin. I used runes to ward this section of the room off so I wouldn't have to cast any spells. I came up with the password because I thought I'd done a good job. The frame of that painting has some runes on it that allows it to work." She then walked over to one of the bookshelves and grabbed a book. They left and Hermione put her hand on the painting and repeat the same phrase, restoring the wall.

Harry tapped the wall and said, "It's a normal wall! I expected it to be just an illusion, like the barrier to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$."

"Well," said Hermione, "we can't have a guest try to lean on the wall and fall backwards now, can we?"

"I guess not."

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Harry read chapter one, while Hermione wrote out her final exam on the subject as she remembered it. Just when they'd both finished up, Hedwig flew in with a letter. After Harry gave her an owl treat, he opened his letter from McGonagall.

"Dear Mr. Potter,

I can certainly understand your desire to stop studying divination. You will be given the final examination for 3rd year ancient runes on September 1st after the feast. If you pass that examination, you will be accepted in ancient runes. Otherwise, I'm afraid you'll be stuck in divination. I suggest you study hard this summer and enlist the help of Miss Granger.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry "

"Well," said Harry with a smile, "at least I have a fighting chance."

"I know you'll pass!" said Hermione, "and then I'll have someone to talk to in that class."

He chuckled for a moment, and then said, "I've just realized that we're dating but we've never been on a date. Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

Hermione blushed. "Yes, but we'll have to get mum and dad's permission."

They walked downstairs to find the Grangers watching television. "Er, mum, dad. Would it be ok if Harry and I go out to dinner tonight?"

Adam Granger turned and faced them with a stern expression. "Where do you plan on going?"

"Er," said Harry, "I was gonna let Hermione pick the restaurant since I still don't know the area that well. Although I did notice a fancy restaurant across the street from our Karate school."

"That's a bit expensive," said Adam.

"That's fine," said Harry, "Believe me sir, I can afford it. We stopped by the wizarding bank the day I got my new clothes and found out that I have a lot more money than I thought. This would be our first date, so I would like to do something special."

"I suppose you'll be taking that Knight Bus there," said Mrs. Granger.

"Yeah," said Harry. "It shows up immediately, not like a cab that you have to wait an hour for. I thought we might also watch a movie."

Adam took a deep breath. "Normally, I'd be concerned about Hermione's safety being out at night, but I suppose both of you could protect yourselves a lot better than I could with that magic of yours. As far as Harry goes, if I trust him here alone with you, then I trust him everywhere alone with you. Ok. Don't get into any trouble, and be here by nine o'clock."

Both Harry and Hermione smiled. "Thanks, Daddy."

“Now, just so you know, that restaurant is a fancy place. I suggest you dress up for the occasion,” said Marissa. “I’ll call them to make a reservation, just in case.”

-

They went back upstairs to their rooms and changed. Hermione told Harry to put on his dark green suit, so he obediently did that. He put on a shirt that was the same color as the suit, and a gold tie. He had matching socks and black shoes. He put on some cologne before leaving his room. He stopped by the bathroom to do the best he could with his unruly hair and went downstairs to wait. Ten minutes later, Harry’s heart stopped beating as Hermione made her way down the stairs in a pastel green dress that looked elegant. He stood up and said, “Y-You look beautiful, and s-so does the dress.”

She blushed and said, “Y-You don’t look so bad yourself. Shall we?” She reached out her arm for him to take, which he did. They then bid Mr. and Mrs. Granger farewell, and walked out the door.

-

Hand in hand, they stepped out of the Knight Bus about a block from the restaurant. They hadn’t spoken much in the few minutes of riding the bus, because it’s really hard to hold a conversation while you’re being thrown in every direction. Harry said, “I wish they’d get seatbelts for that bus.”

Hermione chuckled, “That would be a good idea. They’ve probably never heard of them. Maybe we should tell Stan about them.”

“Yeah. Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?” asked Harry.

She blushed. “As a matter of fact you have. The question is whether or not I’ve told you how handsome you look in that suit.”

Harry’s ears got a bit pink. “Well, we’re here.”

They stepped into the restaurant, and were quickly seated and given menus. He smiled as his eyes scrolled down the menu. “I’ve heard

that some fancy restaurants don't list prices on their menus. I'm glad this one does."

"I've heard of that too," said Hermione. "They claim that if you need to see the price, you can't afford it, but that's silly."

"I agree. Just because I'm rich doesn't mean I don't want to know how much something I'm buying costs. Anyway, do you know what you're getting?"

-

After they'd ordered and gotten appetizers, Harry noticed someone at a nearby table looking at his scar. "Hermione," he whispered. "There's a man with dark hair staring at my scar. Do you think he could be a wizard?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's possible. There's no law against wizards eating in the muggle world," she whispered back. She then deliberately dropped her spoon so that she'd have an excuse to look at the man, who immediately looked away. "Not very friendly-looking, is he?"

"No, I guess not. Anyway, we're supposed to be enjoying our first date. I never even thanked you properly for being such a wonderful friend while I was such a prat last year, and yet you decided to be my girlfriend."

She smiled. "You weren't so bad."

Harry looked into her eyes. "I was horrible to you when Sirius gave me that broom, and I never properly apologized. I knew you were right to have it tested all along, and I knew you would never betray me like Ron was saying, that your heart was in the right place, but I sided with Ron anyway."

She stared at him. "Y-You did? Then why..."

"I guess because Ron was my first friend, and I didn't want to lose him. I..." He put his head down in shame. "I knew you'd forgive me, but I didn't think he would if I'd sided with you. You were driving

yourself crazy with your ridiculous schedule, and I had to add to your stress. I don't know why you put up with me or Ron last year."

She grinned at her boyfriend. "I know why I put up with you. I knew you were better than that. Besides, I already fancied you."

"Which means I probably hurt you even more than I thought."

She put her hand on Harry's. "The past is behind us. You've been wonderful to me since then, even before we got together."

"That's because I finally realized how incredible you are. I really don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd manage," said Hermione, "but you're not without me."

He looked into her eyes. "And I never want to be."

At that moment, their dinners arrived, and they ate in companionable silence.

After they were finished and Harry had paid (leaving a good tip), Hermione said, "There's a theater a few blocks from here. Let's walk there." She grabbed his hand and all but dragged him down the street. They didn't notice the man who'd recognized Harry leave the restaurant and look around.

They were taking a shortcut through an alley when they heard a male voice call out, "Harry Potter."

They turned around, still holding hands, to see the man pointing a wand at them. "Who's your lovely date?"

Harry started to walk in front of her, muttering, "Portkey home."

"How very gallant of you, but then what else would one expect from the famous 'Boy-Who-Lived.' When the Dark L...WHAT!" At that moment Hermione disappeared and the man pointed his wand at Harry with murder in his eyes. "Avada..."

"House One Now!"

“Kadavra!”

-

Harry heard the word and saw the green light coming from the wand, but was pulled away before the curse made contact with him. He found himself on Hermione’s bed looking at her standing nearby and crying. Her parents were both in the doorway watching. Harry got off the bed and hugged Hermione. He asked, “Are you alright? I’m so sorry! This is all my fault! I shou...”

“H-Harry,” came Hermione’s shaky voice. “I-it’s not your fault. A-and you should’ve left as soon as you told me to.”

“I had to make sure you were gone before I left.”

“And you were right to do that, Harry,” said Mr. Granger. “But could you please tell me exactly what happened? All Hermione said was, ‘Dark wizard attacking Harry.’”

Harry took a deep breath. “That’s pretty much what happened. I noticed a guy looking at my scar in the restaurant. He must have followed us. We were walking in an alley and he called out my name. He must have been a leftover Death Eater! He was gonna kill us!”

Hermione swallowed. “Y-You can’t know that he was going to kill us.”

“As I was leaving, I saw the same green light shooting from his wand that I’ve seen in my nightmares. He said, er, ‘Avada Kadavra,’ I think.”

“The death curse!” said Hermione, with tears falling freely from her eyes. “That’s the same curse that killed your parents, the same one that gave you that scar. The use of that curse automatically earns a life sentence in Azkaban. You’re in the history books as the only one who ever survived that curse. You shouldn’t have waited for me!”

“I had to!” said Harry. “It’s my stupid fault we were out there in the first place! I-I’m sorry.” He walked out of Hermione’s room and into the guest room, closing the door behind him.

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He leaned against the door, at last letting his tears fall. He quickly undid his tie and dropped it on the floor, along with his suit coat that he shrugged off. He untucked and then unbuttoned his shirt. Then he rolled it into a ball and threw it at the wall. Then he collapsed on the bed. "What the hell am I gonna do?" he muttered to no one as he took off his socks and shoes. He lay back on the bed wearing nothing but his dress pants (and his portkey) for about ten minutes until he heard a soft knocking at the door. He didn't answer.

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Hermione knocked once more on Harry's door, and then decided that if he were changing he'd have said something. She opened the door to see her boyfriend stretched out on his bed, shirtless and weeping. She timidly said, "H-Harry? Is it all right if I come in?"

He sighed. "Fine. Might as well get it over with. I'll pack my stuff and..."

"What are you talking about, Harry?" she demanded.

Harry answered, "I'm sure your father rightly stated that I'm too dangerous to keep around, so I have to leave. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you in danger. I hope you can forgive me. I..."

"Harry! You are not leaving and you have nothing to apologize for! I took us down that alley, as I explained to my dad. I know the Dursleys taught you otherwise, but you are not responsible for everything that goes wrong! All you wanted was to show me a good time! So don't try to leave, and don't even think about breaking up with me!"

He took a deep breath, and gave her a slight smile. "Ok Hermione. My question is whether he'll try attacking us again or not."

Hermione sighed. "I don't honestly think he was actively looking for you. He's probably just a Death Eater who's mad at you for vanquishing V-Voldemort, and he happened to recognize you, so he took a chance for revenge."

"I-I suppose so. I guess we should call Sirius and tell him about it, too."

"Yeah. By the way, my parents did notice that you had your own portkey to my bedroom. I assured them that you've never snuck into my room and begged them not to bother you about it, citing tonight as a good reason you need it."

-

They told Sirius about the attack, and he agreed with Hermione that it wasn't planned, and since it was at a fancy restaurant, he'd probably guess it was a special occasion. Sirius made a suggestion that Harry find a way to disguise himself when he goes out in public.

-

The next day, they showed up at Black Manor at eight o'clock. They were to study advanced charms that day. Hermione squinted as she looked into the index of the book for a few minutes, and then happily announced to Harry and Ginny, "Today we're going to start with chapter five, Cosmetic Charms – How to Change Your Appearance!"

Ginny looked confused while Harry looked serious. "Why are we skipping the first four chapters?" the redhead asked.

Hermione said, "We'll get back to them," and sighed. "You might as well know. We went out for a date last night, and somebody recognized Harry and tried to kill us."

Ginny's eyes bulged out. "WHAT?"

Hermione explained what had happened. "...so you see, I think Harry would like to be able to change his appearance as soon as possible, even if he has to stop by here to do it." Harry nodded and they began. He managed to make his scar nearly invisible, so that it wouldn't be spotted from a distance. They learned to change their hair color and eye color, as well as lighten or darken their skin slightly. Those charms lasted twelve hours if they weren't removed.

Harry said, "I think I should get contacts. My glasses are a dead giveaway to my identity. I should still wear the frames with clear glass or plastic at Hogwarts anyway. That way people will be looking for a wizard with glasses."

Ginny said, "You should see the eye healer in Diagon Alley. I think he's open on Sundays. He prefers being closed on Mondays and Tuesdays because he claims that nobody comes to the shop on those days anyway."

"Can you show us where it's located after our duel?" asked Hermione. "I think that Harry should keep his scar and hair changed, but have his eyes normal, just in case it makes a difference."

"Of course, and I know, it's a secret, right?" said Ginny.

Harry smiled. "Yes Ginny. I really do appreciate it."

-

A few hours later, the three of them were standing outside of 'The Outer Eye' eye-healer shop. Harry's scar was gone, and his hair was blonde. Ginny said, "Well, that's the place. Good luck. I've got to go before mum thinks I've been gone too long. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye Ginny. Thanks!" said Harry.

"Bye," said Hermione.

"Bye. House One Now." Ginny disappeared.

They walked into the shop, and they saw displays of all types of frames, as well as a small display of round artificial eyeballs of varying colors and sizes spinning around in place. Above them was a sign that said, 'The All-Seeing Eye.' The desk had a sign above it that listed extra charms and prices that could be put on glasses. They included see-in-bright-light, see-in-the-dark, see-through-invisibility-cloaks-and-disillusionment-charms, see-through-anything (permit from the Ministry of Magic required), zooming-in-and-out, instant-replay, and display-notes-inside-lenses, among other options.

Harry said, "I should get a pair of glasses that can see through invisibility and zoom in and out."

Hermione said, "Yeah. Maybe I should too."

Harry then grinned wickedly. "I should also have them display notes to help me take that runes test, and to see through anything."

Hermione looked at him. "Harry! You can't do that, it's cheating! As for the other one, I know what you'd be looking through!"

"I was just kidding about those options," Harry said. "Relax."

They walked up to the desk and the receptionist said, "May I help you?"

Harry said, "Yes. I'm H-Larry, Larry Evans and I'd like to get contact lenses. Can I have them charmed with a few options?"

"Of course. Contact lenses can have the same options as glasses. After you've seen Healer Brown you can specify which charms you'd like. He should be ready in ten minutes. Did you need anything else?"

"Er, yes. I believe my friend would like a pair of glasses that have some charms on them. I'll be paying for them as well."

"H-Larry!"

He whispered in her ear, "This is for your safety. There's nothing more important to me than that. I do not want someone to be able to sneak up on you."

She then said, "Perhaps I should get contact lenses charmed instead. Could I do that?"

"Of course, but you will have to have your eyes checked for that."

Hermione looked at Harry, who nodded.

-

An hour later, they left, each of them wearing a pair of magical contact lenses that never had to be removed and were always comfortable and unbreakable. They could even be worn while swimming with your eyes open, at any depth. They actually could not be removed without saying the proper command, 'Lens out,' which would then allow them to be removed normally." The options both chose were see-in-bright-light, see-at-night, zoom-in-and-out, and see-through-invisibility-cloaks-and-disillusionment-charms. They decided to leave the see-through option on always. To use the options, they had simple commands to say that began with the word, 'Lens.' (For example, 'Lens zoom in'). Both of their eyes were examined, and Harry found that he had needed a new prescription for quite some time, since the Dursleys only got him glasses one time – when the school demanded it. That was the only good thing the Dursleys ever gave him, and they were mad about that. Harry had a pair of regular glasses with gold wire frames made for him, just in case something happened to his new lenses. He also got them to put clear lenses in his old glasses, although they thought it was a bit strange.

The surprise was Hermione. Although her vision was pretty good, the healer had found that she actually did not have perfect vision, much to Hermione's irritation. She claimed, "My eyes are probably just weak now, and yesterday I was crying, so I couldn't see as well."

Healer Brown replied, "This isn't a muggle test that has the patient say what looks clear to them. This is a spell that actually tests the eyes. I'll bet you've been squinting a bit lately to read, haven't you?"

After she'd conceded that point, she started sulking. She was still sulking now, as they both portkeyed first to Black Manor so Harry could remove his cosmetic charms, and then to the Granger residence. "Hermione," said Harry as nicely as he could, "having imperfect vision is not the end of the world."

"I could always see perfectly before! I just..."

"Then you're lucky, Hermione!" said Harry, losing some of his patience. "I've been wearing glasses since I started school! I've never read anything without wearing glasses. I've had to deal with being

practically blind for as long as I can remember! You learned that you don't have perfect vision on a day that you get something to correct the problem that you don't even have to worry about! This is about your pride!"

She was looking into his much-easier-to-see emerald eyes, and could see the truth in what he was saying. "Er, I guess I was; it's just."

"You've found a new imperfection, Hermione. You're only human! You're the most wonderful human I've ever met, but you're not perfect. I have a lot worse vision than you. Does that affect what you think of me?"

"No, no, of course not Harry."

"Then why should it affect what you think of yourself?"

She closed her eyes. "It shouldn't. You're right. It's stupid. I..."

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and it opened, revealing Mr. and Mrs. Granger. "Hi Harry and Hermione," said Adam. "Wow Harry, you look different without glasses. Did you get contacts?"

"Er, yes sir," said Harry.

"We couldn't help but overhear your conversation," said Mrs. Granger. "Hermione, why did you see an eye doctor?"

"It's my fault," said Harry. "I wanted to make it a bit harder to recognize me. I learned how to magically hide my scar and change my hair and eye color. I thought it would be good to get contacts as well, so we went to an eye healer in Diagon Alley. They had a lot of different charms available for glasses and contact lenses, like the ability to see through invisibility cloaks..."

"Invisibility cloaks?" asked Mr. Granger. "Something you wear to be...invisible?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I have one...but I haven't used it here," he added when he saw the expression on Adam's face. "The point is that I felt

that it would be good if she could see if anybody was trying to sneak up on her with one of those, so I insisted she get a pair of glasses. She preferred contacts lenses, and the healer insisted that her eyes get examined.”

“And he found out she doesn’t have perfect vision.” Adam sighed. “All right. How much was it?”

“It’s all right Adam,” said Harry, “Don’t worry about that.”

“I appreciate it Harry, but I insist that I pay for my daughter’s contact lenses and eye exam.”

Harry decided not to mention the charges for the charms, which were rather expensive. He also knew to convert the price to muggle money. “Her contacts and exam came to two hundred and five pounds, and they’re magical contact lenses that don’t ever have to come out. They can even be worn in the pool. They can also be updated every year without being removed. Just a visit that costs about fifty pounds.”

Adam said, “That’s not too bad. Muggle contacts are a bit cheaper, but those magical ones are better. I’ll get you the money tomorrow.”

Mrs. Granger asked, “Can muggles get those lenses?”

Hermione said, “Unfortunately, no. They depend on the wearer’s magic to replenish the charms that keep them working properly.

Adam chuckled, “I was just thinking that Hermione’s boyfriend has money, fame, a device that can bring him into her bedroom, and an invisibility cloak. I guess my only choice is to trust you two, because I seriously doubt I could stop you from sneaking around. If you don’t mind, Harry, I’d like to see that cloak of yours.”

“Sure.”

After they went in Harry’s bedroom, he got the cloak out of his trunk and put it on. He walked up to Adam and startled him by putting his hand on his shoulder.”

“Wow! That’s incredible! My only question is why an upstanding young man such as yourself would have something like this.”

“Well that’s easy to explain, Adam,” said Harry. “It used to belong to my father. Dumbledore gave it to me for Christmas during my first year. He said it was time that it was returned to me.”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger both looked appalled. “The headmaster gave an eleven-year-old boy something like this?” she said.

“When is the first time you used it to disobey school rules?” asked Adam.

“Er, the night I got it. You see...”

“Never mind the details,” said Adam. “I’m just making the point that it was ridiculous and irresponsible for him to give it to you. How many times have you been in danger because you were using the cloak?” After Harry and Hermione nervously looked at each other, Adam said, “I don’t want to know. Harry, please don’t risk Hermione’s safety by using this or any other tricks you’ve got up your sleeves to disobey school rules.”

Harry looked into Mr. Granger’s eyes and said, “I promise.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

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The next day after karate class, Neville walked up to Harry and Hermione nervously. “Er, I was, well wondering...about...”

“What is it, Neville?” asked Harry.

“I,er, well Ginny...do you think she’d...er, go out with me?”

Hermione smiled broadly. “Well, there’s only one way to find that out, isn’t there?”

Neville’s cheeks were pink by now. “Er...”

“So,” said Harry with a grin, “you like her?”

Unable to speak, Neville only nodded.

“Neville,” said Hermione, “I can think of a way to help you. We can try to get her to go somewhere with the three of us as a double-date.”

“Hermione,” said Harry, “I don’t think I should...”

“You can change your appearance,” whispered Hermione, “and I promise, no alleys.”

He whispered, “Fine, but I insist you make him a portkey somewhere, and not your bedroom.”

She chuckled. “We should tell you, Neville that Saturday night we went out and Harry was recognized by a crazy who tried to kill us...”

“What?” exclaimed Neville. “It must have been a Death Eater.”

“Yes,” continued Hermione, “So Harry’s a bit reluctant about being out in public. He’s learned ways to change his appearance – his hair and eye color. He can even almost totally hide his scar. He also has contact lenses.”

“Then why...” asked Neville.

“Because I don’t want anyone to know about it. I want anyone looking for Harry Potter to be looking for a kid with dark hair, glasses, green eyes, and a scar. When they see me with blue eyes, blonde hair, no glasses, and no scar, they won’t think it’s me. I’m also going by the name Larry Evans. Larry rhymes with Harry, and Evans was my mother’s maiden name. I’m wearing clear glasses right now. I think showing up here now with a different appearance would bring too much attention to me, so I can only hope no one looking for me would check a muggle karate class. Don’t tell anyone about my new appearance, all right. I’m only telling you so that you’ll know who I am.”

“All right, Harry,” said Neville.

“We’ll tell you tomorrow if Ginny will go,” said Hermione as Neville was called away by his Grandmother.

Chapter 12 – Life's No Picnic

The next morning, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny worked on increasing their magical potential. Harry didn't wear his useless glasses to Grimmauld Place. They spent about an hour reading the second chapter (alternating someone reading it out loud) The previous week Harry and Hermione had read chapter one while Ginny was decorating, which was just an introduction to the concepts. (The day after that lesson, Harry had studied wordless-wandless while Hermione was charming two-way mirrors and Ginny was decorating, so they'd decided to start with chapter one the next day) They'd let Ginny read the first chapter of the subject they'd started before she joined them. They spent the next hour doing recommended exercises. The first exercise was to go into a completely dark room, cast a lumos charm normally, and then to spend ten minutes doing a type of meditation that required full concentration on bringing one's magic to the surface, and then cast it again. All three of them were surprised at how much brighter their second lumos spell was than the first.

"Wow!" said Ginny, "My first lumos barely let me see a few feet in front of me. That second one lit up the whole room!" She then looked at the others. "I mean, I know the same thing happened for you too. It just surprised me. I kind of thought this subject might be a waste of time."

Harry smiled. "I was a bit skeptical myself, but I've learned to trust Hermione. If she thinks it's worth studying, it is."

Hermione blushed. "The book said that that particular exercise usually silences skeptics. I just felt that if we learned to do this, we would seem like more powerful wizards than we are, just because we're actually using all our magic."

"The trick is to learn how to cast spells that powerful one after another while in combat, when we don't have time to meditate," said Harry.

The book said to meditate like that for at least ten minutes every day (in addition to the meditating they were already doing as part of animagus training) and concentrate as much as possible when casting spells, and eventually you'll be able to always cast spells with more magic behind them immediately, rather than only after

meditating. The rest of the book was different methods for improving concentration. They tried the same experiment with other spells until it was time to duel and achieved similar results.

For the first few minutes of the duel, the spells did seem more powerful, but then went down to normal power. After they'd dueled for an hour, it was over. Ginny said, "I've got to get back to the Burrow now. Mum has chores for me to do."

"Before you go," said Harry, "There's something we want to ask you. Want to go on a picnic with us and Neville?"

Ginny looked at Harry, her ears turning pink. "Do you mean, double-date? Are you trying to set me up with him?"

Hermione's cheeks turned slightly pink. "Er, he, er, really likes you. He kind of asked us if we thought you'd go out with him."

Ginny's cheeks started to gain color. "What did you say?"

"That there's only one way to find out," said Harry.

"But he's really shy," said Hermione, "so we thought that this might be easier to give you a chance to spend time together without pressure of a regular date so that you could, er, decide if you fancy him or not." Hermione said this as quickly as she could.

Ginny was now fully blushing. "Er, I suppose so. A picnic sounds like fun, but it can't be until Saturday. Mum agreed to let me hang out with you guys in the mornings instead of doing chores with Ron, but I have to spend the afternoons doing the chores he leaves for me."

"Then we'll have a picnic lunch together Saturday," said Hermione smiling.

"I'll bet my mum will want to pack it for us, so I'll take care of the food," said Ginny.

-

The rest of the week went by uneventfully. Neville was thrilled and terrified about the news of the picnic. On Harry's insistence, Hermione gave him a necklace portkey that went to Grimmauld Place only (she couldn't make a portkey that led to a place she'd never been, such as Neville's house) and gave him instructions how to use it.

On Friday it was time for the trio to continue working on charming brooms to fly. After about an hour, Hermione had gotten hers to move pretty fast. Fifteen minutes later, Harry was flying his rapidly around the house, much to Hermione's frustration. She yelled, "It's great you got the broom to work, but honestly you can't fly around inside!" while Ginny was laughing.

Harry said, "But it's fun! You should be riding yours! I'll bet it's faster than mine!" Harry did not stop, and was joined about five minutes later by an excited Ginny.

Finally, letting out a sigh of frustration, Hermione said, "If you stop flying around the house like five-year-olds, I'll agree to play a game of quidditch at the Burrow tomorrow after our picnic if Mrs. Weasley allows us."

Harry stopped immediately saying, "It's a deal! We'll use these brooms. Ginny, do you think your mum will let us?"

"She doesn't give me hardly any chores to do on weekends. I'm sure Ron and the twins will play, too. Percy will be locked in his room writing a report on cauldron bottom thickness."

"What?" asked Harry. "Why?"

"He started working for the ministry last week, and for some reason he thinks he has to work twenty-four hours a day. I honestly think he stopped sleeping. Even when he comes to dinner, he's always talking about his job or his boss, Mr. Crouch, who by the way everybody else hates according to dad. He's a complete stickler for the rules, just like Percy. You remember how pompous he was walking around with his Head Boy badge? Now he's even worse! You'd think he was the Minister of Magic by how important he acts! Honestly, I think he'd sell out our family if he thought it would advance his career!"

"I'm sure you don't mean that," said Hermione, "He just believes in following rules, and so do I for that matter."

Harry grinned at his girlfriend. "Then why are you practicing underage magic in this house?" Hermione's ears went pink. "And how many times have we broken rules, sometimes even laws, together?"

Hermione's face was pink. "Er, well, I guess you have a point."

-

The next morning, Lupin showed up at 8 o'clock in Grimmauld Place for first their dueling and then occlumency training. He looked at Harry and then did a double-take. "Did you get contact lenses?"

"Yeah, but don't tell anybody. Last Saturday I was recognized by someone I guess was a leftover Death Eater, and he attacked Hermione and I. I've been working on ways to disguise myself when I go out in public. This is part of it. I have clear glasses that I'll wear anyplace I want to be recognized like Hogwarts, but don't see the point in wearing them here."

"I, er, heard from Sirius about the attack. It's a good thing you had those portkeys to escape. The ministry detected the killing curse in the area but didn't find anything when they showed up."

"I should've fought him. I've thought about it. That murderer is still loose thanks to me."

"No! You did the right thing! You're starting to train, and eventually you'll get good enough to fight Death Eaters, but right now you are not ready to fight them! You did the right thing!" said Lupin emphatically.

"Of course you did, Harry," said Hermione. "If you hadn't left you'd have been killed! You said so yourself!"

Harry sighed. "I know. I just...I just don't like the idea of running away from a fight!"

"I understand," said Lupin, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder, "But sometimes escaping is the right thing to do." Then Remus decided to change the subject. "What else are you doing to change your appearance?"

Harry pointed his wand at his hair, eyes, and scar, muttering the incantations to change himself into a blond-haired, brown-eyed (he decided that he liked brown eyes better than blue), scarless (very light scar anyway) teenager. He jokingly shook Moony's hand and said, "Hi. My name is Larry Evans. It's good to meet you."

Lupin chuckled. "It's good to meet you, too. That is a pretty effective disguise. It might be prudent for Hermione to disguise herself as well on the odd chance that she'd be recognized. Anyway, are you going to change back for our duel?"

Harry smiled, "No. The charm lasts twelve hours, and I'm going to need it when we're done here. We're going on a picnic."

"Sounds like fun," said the werewolf. "In that case, I suggest we go into the dueling room. I've taken the liberty this week of putting together something of a lesson plan for your dueling, with advice on different things to work on. If you don't mind."

"Of course we don't mind, Professor Lupin," said Hermione.

"I'm no longer your teacher, so..."

"You are if you're teaching us better dueling and occlumency," said Harry with a smirk. "I should be paying you..."

"Nonsense," said Lupin. "I'm just helping out some friends. The first thing I'd like to work on is blocking the killing curse."

The three kids gaped at him. "B,But Professor Lupin," said Hermione, "There is no defense against the killing curse."

"Last Saturday night Harry defended himself from the killing curse by disappearing. The best block is not to be there. One way to do that, which is the best way for you kids, is portkeying away. That's what you should do. But if for some reason you can't, there are a few

options. One is to dodge the spell, and the other is to summon something in between yourself and the caster's wand. Do any of you know how to summon?"

"I know Hermione and I do," said Harry.

"I don't," said Ginny timidly.

Remus smiled understandingly at her. "That's fine. Harry and Hermione can practice with one person summoning things in front of them to absorb curses the other is hexing them while I teach you how to summon in the living room."

After about a half hour of masterful instruction by Lupin, Ginny had learned the summoning charm. They returned to the dueling room to find Hermione throwing hex after hex at Harry while he kept summoning item after item to shield him. Hermione and Harry had conjured a bunch of junk in the room, and Harry was putting it to good use.

Ginny and Remus watched as Harry kept moving around and summoning different things in front of him. Ginny chuckled as she noticed Hermione getting frustrated. Lupin noticed that a few times she hadn't even spoken the incantation, but Harry was still successfully evading her. Lupin called out, "That's great! I think you should take a break." Hermione shot Remus a glare before he said, "Hermione, you've been doing an incredible job. I'm not sure if you're aware of it or not, but you sent a few of those hexes nonverbally."

"Really?" asked Hermione, her frustration forgotten.

"Yes," said Lupin with a smile.

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The rest of the dueling, as well as the occlumency lesson went well. Before Lupin left, he looked uneasy. He said, "I don't know if I should tell you or not, but Dumbledore told me that one of the dark objects in that box was really bad. That locket that one of you mentioned in the list that you left."

"Did he tell you what it is?" asked Ginny.

"Well, yes. It's called a Horcrux. It contained a piece of Voldemort's soul before Dumbledore destroyed it. As long as he's got a Horcrux in existence, he can't die. That's why he didn't die when he tried to kill Harry. To make one, you murder someone to create a tear in your soul, and then perform a certain spell to separate that tear and literally split your soul. No dark wizard has ever been known to make more than one of those, until now."

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione. "We only found one."

"The diary," said Ginny softly. Lupin nodded quietly. "That's why the locket seemed familiar to me."

"If he's made more than one of these Horcruxes, how do we know how many he's made?" asked Harry.

"We don't," said Lupin sadly. "Professor Dumbledore has some leads he's going to investigate to find more information. He mentioned visiting Tom Riddle's favorite teacher from when he was a student. I've got to go now. Just make sure you don't tell anybody about that."

"We won't," assured Harry while the others nodded.

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After Remus had left, Ginny said, "I've got to go to the Burrow to get the picnic basket mum put together. I'll be right back."

After she disappeared, Harry smiled at his girlfriend and said evilly, "Now it's time to turn you into my mother," and he changed her hair red and her eyes green. He stared at his handiwork shaking his head for a few seconds while she smiled back at him. "That's too weird. I don't think I could kiss you looking like that."

"Why not? Haven't you always fanaticized that?" she laughed as he turned her into a blond with blue eyes.

"No," said Harry with a smirk, "Let's see, I could call you Marissa Adams."

Hermione nodded. "That would be acceptable, Larry Evans."

At that moment, Neville appeared in the house and looked at the two of them, obviously not recognizing them. "Er, hi. I'm Neville...Neville Longbottom."

Harry held back his smile, shook Neville's hand, and slightly disguised his voice. "Good to meet you Neville. This is Marissa Adams, and I'm Larry Evans."

Neville gazed at Harry. "L,Larry Evans? That's the name Harry said...wait a minute. He looked at both of them more closely and they burst out laughing. "It is you and Hermione! Great disguises. Is G-Ginny here?"

"Don't worry," said Harry, "She's getting the food. She'll be right back."

At that moment, as though summoned by the mention of her name, Ginny appeared holding a picnic basket. "Hi guys! Great disguise Hermione! If I didn't know who you were, I'd never recognize you." Neville blushed when Ginny arrived, which caused her to blush.

Hermione said snobbishly, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm Marissa Adams, and I'm here with my boyfriend, Larry Evans."

"Should we all change our appearance?" asked Neville.

"No," said Harry, "I'm the one people will recognize, the one who's a target. Hermione's only disguised so that people don't know I'm with her."

"Are you sure?" asked Ginny, "My Weasley red hair is a dead giveaway. People know you're friendly with my family."

Harry chuckled. "A few minutes ago Hermione had Weasley red hair."

Ginny looked surprised. "Why'd you change it to blond then?"

"Harry had made me look like his mother. He even gave me her green eyes."

“I thought it was too weird and changed her to what she is now.”

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They walked outside the house which Lupin had apparently cleaned, Harry noticed. He mused that Sirius must have mentioned it to Moony. They walked to a nearby park that had picnic tables and Ginny set their basket down on one of them. Hermione, who'd been carrying a book bag, set that down as well, and opened it. Everyone expected to find it full of books, but instead, they saw things that neither Neville nor Ginny could identify.

Hermione pulled out a circular object and asked, “Haven't you ever thrown a Frisbee around before?” when she noticed the confused expression on their faces.

Although Harry hadn't been allowed to play with a Frisbee, Dudley had owned one, so Harry was familiar with it, but Hermione had to explain what to do with that toy to the others before they threw it around for a while. After about a half hour of that, they ate. Mrs. Weasley had somehow, and Harry believed magically, fit enough sandwiches to feed all the Weasleys, not to mention the snacks and bottles of pumpkin juice and butterbeer. When they'd all eaten their fill, Ginny commented, “There's still enough here to feed Ron!” causing everyone to laugh.

Hermione then pulled out four similar devices, and another Frisbee. She handed out the devices unknown to Ginny and Neville. “These are squirt guns. They're used to shoot water at people. We're gonna split up into teams, Me and Harry against Ginny and Neville. Each team is gonna hide a Frisbee. The goal is to get the other team's Frisbee onto your side of the park. If you get shot with a squirtgun, you have to walk back to your side before you can try again. If you're holding a Frisbee, you have to drop it.

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Although it was a pain explaining how to work a squirt gun, they eventually enjoyed this version of 'Capture the Flag.' Not that long into the game however, they were purposely getting shot by the other team because of how hot it was. While Ginny and Neville were

discussing strategy, Harry snuck to their side of the park and found their poorly hidden Frisbee. Ginny called out, "Harry," as she raised her squirt gun to shoot him. When he heard his name called, he immediately threw the Frisbee into the waiting hands of Hermione, ending the game just before Ginny and Neville emptied out their squirt guns on him. He was soaked when they started walking toward the house. Harry wanted to portkey back but Hermione insisted that they do things the muggle way. Harry opened the door and they all walked in. As soon as the door was closed, Hermione performed a drying charm on them all, starting with Harry.

"So Neville," said Harry, "Are you coming to the Burrow with us to play some quidditch? Hermione promised to play."

"We've got some new brooms we want to try out," said Hermione.

"New brooms? Harry, you've got a Firebolt! Why would you buy a new broom?"

"I didn't buy it. I charmed a muggle broom. All three of us did."

Neville looked at them stunned. "H-How did you do that? They don't teach that at Hogwarts?"

Harry said, "The same way we made the portkeys. Hermione got me to buy a book on magical transportation, and we've been studying it together."

"Cool!" said Neville, "But I have to go. My Gran will kill me if I'm late. This was fun. B-B-Bye G-Ginny."

"Bye Neville," said Ginny.

"Bye Harry and Hermione," said Neville.

"Bye," said Harry and Hermione together before they removed their disguises.

"So Ginny, did you and Neville get to talk much?" asked Hermione.

Ginny frowned. "Not very much. A little. He seemed to have trouble talking to me. He really is shy, but he's also very nice. If he asked me out, I'd say yes, but you can't just tell him that. You can encourage him to, but not guarantee my answer."

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They went with Ginny to the Burrow, bringing their newly charmed brooms. When Ron saw the broom Harry was carrying, he called out, "Hey Harry, why don't you have your Firebolt?"

"Because I wanted to test out this broom," he answered.

"But the Firebolt has got to be a lot better than those generic brooms! Where'd you dig those up, anyway?"

"That's none of your business, Ronald," said Ginny. "Are you going to play or talk about brooms?"

"Fine, don't tell me," said Ron, "Let's play!"

They separated into two teams. One had Harry as chaser, George as beater, and Hermione as keeper. The other had Ginny as chaser, Fred as beater, and Ron as keeper. As the game progressed, it became very clear that the three new brooms were superior to the ones the Weasley boys were using. Harry could tell that the broom he was flying wasn't as good as his Firebolt, but it was very much like his Nimbus 2000 had been. He actually wasn't sure which of those two was better. Because of Hermione's pathetic attempt at goal-keeping against Ginny, her team lost.

After the game, Hermione started apologizing to Harry, saying, "I just don't fly very well..."

But he cut her off saying, "But you kiss great!" and then demonstrated.

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The days passed by quickly, and Neville had in fact gotten enough courage to owl Ginny a dinner invitation. She said yes. They apparently had a good enough time, because they started going out

after that. Before they knew it, Harry, Ginny, and Hermione were doing their Animagus meditation, where they would learn their form.

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Chapter 13 – Making Progress

Harry opened his eyes to find that he was curled up on the grass in the middle of a forest. He could somehow hear and smell his surroundings more than ever before. He also felt bigger and stronger than he ever had in his life. He looked down at his hands and received a shock. What he saw didn't look anything like his hands. Instead of hands, he saw sharp claws with tan fur on them. He racked his brain trying to figure out what had happened to him. Then he remembered. He'd just started his animagus form-finding meditation. He realized that he must be in that form now, but wasn't sure what that form was, aside from a creature with claws.

He tentatively got up, and subconsciously tried to stand on his two feet, which resulted in his falling down on his back. He shouted, "Oww!" but it sounded like a powerful roar. He smiled to himself thinking, 'Whatever I am is a powerful beast.' When he carefully turned himself around and got up, this time walking on all four legs, he was instinctively impressed to walk in a particular direction. As he walked for a few minutes, he found that he could hear the slightest movement near him, such as leaves being crushed under his paws.

He began to smell what he instinctively knew to be water, and he realized how thirsty he was. He soon came upon a stream, and thought about how he was going to drink. He realized that he only had one choice, but wasn't entirely comfortable with it. Reasoning that his pride wouldn't quench his thirst, he moved his head over the water to start licking it up. Before he did that, he noticed the reflection that was peering up at him. With big emerald eyes, a wild black mane and lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, he was a lion. He stuck out his tongue toward the water. The moment he felt the water, he woke up.

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Harry opened his eyes to see that he was lying on his back on a mat that had been conjured specifically for this exercise. He turned around to see two girls lying on similar mats nearby. They appeared to be stirring. He got up, standing normally on two feet, and walked over to Hermione.

The bushy-haired girl opened her eyes and looked around. She smiled upon seeing her boyfriend's emerald eyes. "Hi Harry."

Harry smiled and reached out his hand to help her up. "Hi. Did you have a pleasant dream?"

"I think so. I found out that I'm a cat."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm a dark brown cat with brown eyes and...big front teeth." She blushed at the last statement. "Even as an animal I can't escape my big teeth. I don't know how you can stand looking at me smile. I asked my parents to help, but..."

"I love looking at you smiling," interrupted Harry. "And I also love kissing you," he added with a wink.

"You may want to remember that someone else is in the room before you start snogging," said Ginny as she got up.

They both blushed at that statement. Over the past few weeks they'd kissed a lot, but never done that yet. "I'm sorry Ginny," said Harry, "I should've helped you up too."

"I guess I can forgive you Harry. I'd expect you to pay more attention to your girlfriend than me. By the way, I'm a cute red robin. What are you two?"

Harry said with a smirk, "Then you'd better watch out for Hermione. She's a cat and may decide she's hungry."

"Ha-ha, very witty," said Hermione sarcastically as Ginny started giggling. "You never said what you are, Harry."

Harry sighed, acting disappointed. "Well, I have eyes as green as a fresh-pickled..."

"Hey!" shouted Ginny defensively as her ears, face, and neck turned pink, "Er, Tom made me send that Valentine! Yeah! He wrote that poem!"

Harry did his best to hide his amusement. "Okay. If you say so."

"Anyway," said Hermione, "You still haven't said what you are."

"Well," he said, looking at the ground as though embarrassed. "I still have my scar."

"Come on, Harry," said Ginny. "It can't be that bad. You're not a rat like Pettigrew, are you?"

"Er, no," he said, using the bit of occlumency training he'd had to stop himself from showing his excitement as he kept his head down.

"You're not a snake are you?" asked Hermione. "I know you speak snake-language."

"No," Harry said. "I'm a mammal. I have a tail and claws." He then looked up at them grinning broadly. "I'm a black-maned lion!"

"You...you...you acted like it was something bad!" shouted Hermione as Ginny laughed. "I thought I was gonna have to console you."

Ginny said, "I guess you're a true Gryffindor."

"I guess so," said Harry. He then conjured a few dozen rocks on the ground. "If you two are ready, I think it's time for our duel."

"Defend yourself," said Ginny as she pulled out her wand and nonverbally shot a stunner at Harry.

Harry pointed his wand at one of the rocks, and it quickly moved into the beam coming from Ginny's wand, diffusing it. "You're getting pretty good at that," said Ginny as Harry dodged a spell that Hermione sent at him.

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An hour later, each of them had successfully used a rock to block a spell more than once. Lupin had suggested learning to use small objects to block spells so that they could learn precision in blocking spells with objects. He'd said, "There's no way to guarantee that

there'll be a table to use for cover when you're attacked." Harry had won more duels than the others, but the girls each did win their share. Harry and Hermione went from there to Hermione's home, and then to karate class for the last class before the yellow belt test.

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After a difficult class, the couple spoke briefly to Neville and bicycled back to the house, intending to spend an hour in the pool before Hermione would start another Ancient Runes lesson. However, that was not meant to happen.

While they were walking in the house after parking their bikes in the garage, Harry noticed a tall elderly man with long white hair, a long beard, and a hooked nose. He was wearing a brown suit. When he turned toward the Granger's house, he said with a twinkle in his eye, "Hello Mr. Potter. Hello Miss Granger. It's good to see you both."

Harry looked more closely at the man and his jaw dropped. "Hello Pro-Professor Dumbledore."

"Hello headmaster," said Hermione.

"May I come into the house with you two? There's something I'd like to discuss."

"C-Certainly," said Hermione. "I must admit this is unexpected."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes. I'd imagine it is."

After they'd gone inside and Hermione graciously got them some tea, she claimed to need to go to the loo and made a phone call from her bedroom.

The aged wizard sat at the table across from Harry and said conversationally, "So Harry, have you been enjoying your little visit with the Grangers?"

Harry wasn't sure where his headmaster was going with this, so he decided to answer, but decided to make sure not to look at Dumbledore

in the eye (so he couldn't use occlumency). "Yes sir. I've been enjoying myself very much."

"That's good, Harry. It's good to spend time with friends, and then to return to our families." Harry now had an idea what this was about. "Speaking of which; when are you planning to return to your family?"

Harry looked at him as though he'd grown a second head. "The Dursleys don't consider me family, and I don't consider them family either."

The aged wizard put down his head for a moment, and then looked toward Harry. "Now I realize that the Dursleys may not be the ideal family, but you need to spend some time with them. I'm sure they miss you."

"Only if the lawn needs to be mowed or the dishes washed or the attic needs to be cleaned!" spat Harry.

"Surely you don't mean that," asked Dumbledore, "I'm sure that you care for each other. You should go back to their house."

"As long as the Grangers will let me, I'm staying here. If they won't let me stay here, I'll find some other place." He decided not to let Dumbledore know he knew how rich he is. "I'm not going back with them!"

Dumbledore took a deep breath and stopped talking like a concerned grandfather. "Harry listen! You have to stay there for your protection. There's nothing to discuss. Pack your things."

"Harry's staying here as long as he wants to!" shouted Hermione from the doorway.

"Miss Granger, you shouldn't talk back to your headmaster," said Dumbledore coldly.

"It's her house, not Hogwarts," said Harry, "She can talk how she wants!"

“Sir, during the summer you’re neither mine nor Harry’s headmaster,” said Hermione even more coldly than Dumbledore had spoken to her.

Dumbledore started talking like a pleasant grandfather again. “Children, you obviously don’t understand, but you’ll have to trust me on this. Harry needs to spend most of the summer with the Dursleys. It’s for his own good.”

“HIS OWN GOOD!” came the voice of Adam Granger from the door. “I’ve seen how the Dursleys treat him, and I’ll bet you have too! If you gave Harry his invisibility cloak, then the odds are that you have another one, or some other way to become invisible!”

Dumbledore sighed and said softly, “Yes, I have seen their treatment of him, and it is unfortunate. Nevertheless it is essential...”

“Essential that he lives with people who hate him!” shouted Marissa, who had just entered. “They’ve never even bought him his own clothes!”

“They had him living in a cupboard until his Hogwarts letter came, telling the Dursleys that you knew where his bedroom was!” shouted Hermione indignantly.

“Harry has to trust my judgment,” said Dumbledore. “It’s for the best.”

“Trust your judgment?” asked Adam. “Trust the judgment of a headmaster who gives an invisibility cloak to an eleven year old? Trust the judgment of a man who leaves a baby with people who despise him while hundreds of families would’ve been more than happy to have him live with them? Come to think of it, what business is it of yours where Harry spends his summers? I doubt very much that it is the policy of Hogwarts to make sure that its students spend the summer where the headmaster wants them to.”

Dumbledore said, “There is a type of protection on Harry as long as he can call the place where his mother’s blood lives home.”

“Really?” asked Hermione curiously. “What does this protection do?”

“It helps him to be safe,” said Dumbledore.

"In what way?" asked Hermione. "If it prevents him from dying, then you wouldn't have slowed down his fall when the dementors attacked that quidditch match, and Fawkes wouldn't have had to heal him from the basilisk wound in the Chamber of Secrets. If it prevents him from being injured, then he wouldn't hurt himself so often. He wouldn't have had to save himself from the dementors a month ago. What exactly does it protect him from?"

"Er," said the headmaster, clearly at a loss, "Well, I think that the protection has helped him be lucky in those instances..."

"Lucky?" shouted Adam. "Lucky? From what my daughter has told me, he's spent more time in the hospital wing of your school than any ten kids! I think there's something wrong with your spell!"

"There can't be. As long as he calls the house his home..."

"Sir, I have NEVER called the Dursley's house my home, either out loud or in my thoughts! Especially after I started at Hogwarts! I think of that house as prison! All I do there besides chores is count down the days until I get to leave!"

The old man's face paled. "I-I hadn't considered that affect on the wards. It never occurred to me, and it should have, considering how much danger Harry has been in. Part of those blood wards is love. I had assumed when I left him there all those years ago that they would love him, and he them. He is Petunia's nephew after all. If there is no love between Harry and the Dursleys, which causes Harry to not consider that house to be his home nor the occupants his family, those wards won't actually work, even though they register on my equipment as functioning. It's like having a perfectly good wand in the hands of a muggle. It's worthless."

Dumbledore sighed. "I've never allowed myself to consider the idea that leaving Harry with the Dursleys was a mistake before, but I guess it was. Harry, I owe you an immense apology. Professor McGonagall warned me about the kind of people the Dursleys were before I left you with them. I should've listened to her. She'd actually watched them for a day, I hadn't. I was so sure that I'd made the right decision."

Dumbledore seemed to age several years in front of them as he sighed. "Perhaps we should investigate the possibility of Harry getting a different guardian than the Dursleys. It would be easier if Sirius' name was cleared." He then looked at Mr. and Mrs. Granger with a twinkle in his eyes. "You wouldn't be interested in becoming Harry's guardians, would you?"

The adult Grangers looked down, but Adam did speak. "We like Harry enough, but I, er, I don't think Harry and Hermione want to be brother and sister."

Dumbledore looked puzzled. "Why not? They've been the best of friends for years. They can always be seen together."

"Well sir," said Hermione.

"We've started dating," said Harry.

Dumbledore smiled at the young couple. "Really? That's wonderful news, but it does complicate things, doesn't it? I suppose there's nothing wrong with your staying here this summer. We can address this problem this year before next summer. I would ask the Weasleys, but I'd dare say they have enough children of their own. If you've no objection, I'd like to set up some wards protecting your home since Harry is staying here for now."

Hermione and Harry watched Dumbledore in fascination as he set up protective wards around the house. Dumbledore mentioned that McGonagall had told him of Harry's desire to take Ancient Runes instead of Divination. Harry simply said, "I'm tired of having my death predicted every week."

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At the end of karate class, Harry and Hermione proudly accepted their new yellow belts. Unfortunately, Neville had made one mistake during the test, and would have to take it again a week later. "I'm sure you'll get it next week," said Harry.

“Why don’t you come have dinner with us,” said Hermione, obviously trying to cheer up Neville. “I’m sure my parents would be glad to have you. I promise Fred and George won’t be there.”

Neville put his head down and shuffled his feet nervously. “Er, I-I’ve got to meet Ginny...”

“Say no more, mate,” said Harry. “We understand. Enjoy your date.”

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After Harry and Hermione had enjoyed some time in the pool and studied, Hermione said, “Harry, I’d like to go out tonight.”

Harry looked nervous. “Er, as much as I enjoy it, I’m not sure it’s safe.”

“Come on Harry,” insisted Hermione, “That was an isolated incident. Besides, we can disguise ourselves first.”

Harry scratched his chin as he thought. “I suppose so. That is the whole point of my disguise, isn’t it?”

“All right. This time I want to actually see a movie after we eat. Let’s go downstairs and ask my parents if it’s alright.”

After a slight objection from Mr. Granger about safety, and reassurances that they would be disguised and would stay in public places, avoiding alleys, her parents agreed. The two of them portkeyed into Grimmauld place at six o’clock so they could magically disguise themselves and go out. When they arrived, they received a shock.

While they were changing their features, they heard a male voice shout, “Stupefy!” Both of them moved quickly and pulled out their wands and looked around. They heard the same voice shout, “Petrificus Totalus!” followed by a loud THUD.

“That’s coming from the dueling room!” said Harry as he started walking fast in that direction.

They found the door closed, so Harry pointed his wand at the door while Hermione prepared to pull the door open. Now that they were close to the room, they could hear some spells being fired nonverbally, while others were being fired by a female voice. The male voice was shouting other spells back. Hermione opened the door and the two of them looked inside.

Ginny turned and said, "HARRY? What are..."

At that moment she was hit by a stunning spell shot from Neville's wand and fell. "Oh no! Harry, I didn't mean to stun her when she wasn't looking!"

Hermione revived her while Harry asked, "What are you doing here?"

Neville said nervously, "Er, dueling practice. Ginny said you wouldn't mind."

"I don't," said Harry, "We were just surprised to hear dueling when we stopped here to disguise ourselves."

"We're going on a date," said Hermione, who'd finished reviving Ginny.

"Er, I told Neville you wouldn't mind him training here. He wanted to practice dueling," said Ginny when she stood up.

"I just told him I don't mind, Ginny. In fact, Neville you're welcome to join us when we duel every morning."

Neville looked at the floor again, "Er, I didn't know you practiced dueling."

Ginny said, "Harry asked me to keep it secret."

"Oh," said Neville, "I'd love to, but I can't. My Gran makes me visit...I'm busy. I'm lucky she lets me take karate. I can only come late like this."

Ginny said, "We duel for a while and go out for dinner. We've been doing this since Monday."

“Do you want to join us tonight?” asked Hermione. “We’ll be going to a movie afterward. You’re welcome to join us there as well.”

Neville said, “Er, if it’s alright with Ginny, that’ll be fine. My Gran lets me stay out until ten so we have time.”

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They went to a fast food restaurant and then watched an action movie that had romance as well, so they all enjoyed it. After Harry and Hermione got back to her house, Harry said, “This ended a lot better than our first date.”

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Chapter 14 – Meeting Amelia Bones

“...I thought we were about to have a yelling match with Dumbledore, but he suddenly backed down and said that he’d never allowed himself to consider that he’d made a mistake leaving me with the Dursleys. I put up with them all those years for nothing!”

Harry and Hermione were talking to Sirius through his two-way mirror the morning after Dumbledore had visited.

“I’m glad that he at least admitted it was a mistake,” said Sirius. “What happened then?”

Hermione answered. “Well, he thought it might be a good idea to find new guardians for Harry. If you weren’t a fugitive, you’d be the first choice. He asked my parents about adopting Harry, but they didn’t think I’d want to be Harry’s sister. He figures the Weasleys already have enough children, which I’d agree with.”

Sirius looked thoughtful and sighed. “I was prepared to take Harry with me the night his parents died. But since Dumbledore interfered and had Hagrid take him to the Dursleys, I had to try to get revenge on Wormtail. I got him cornered and then he faked his death, leaving me to take the blame! The next thing I knew, I was being thrown in Azkaban and sentenced to life without a trial! I wasn’t even questioned!”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “N-no trial?”

“That’s right,” said Sirius, “After Harry vanquished Voldemort, the ministry wanted to pretend they’d helped, so they started arresting every suspected Death Eater they could find. The ones who got out like Lucius Malfoy were the guilty ones. The ones like me who stayed were the innocent ones.”

“But don’t they have to try criminals?” asked Harry. “I mean, Fudge sentenced you to the dementor’s kiss, but it had never been proven that you belonged in prison in the first place.”

“Most people at the ministry don’t care about justice. They wanted to look good then by putting me in prison and now by destroying me.”

Hermione looked deep in thought. "But Sirius, can't we demand a trial with veritaserum to prove your innocence since you've never had one?"

Sirius said, "Fudge won't let you do that! Although, if you can prove I have the right to a trial, maybe Madam Bones, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, could demand I have a fair trial. She's a fair person. If they have yours, Ron's, and Moony's pensieve memories, it might work. But they'd have Snape testify as well."

Harry clenched his fists at the mention of the greasy git while Hermione said, "But if they use his memories, they'll see that he missed most of our conversation and is therefore an unreliable witness."

"The trouble is, you'll have to give yourself up for a trial, and knowing Fudge, he'll have the dementors suck out your soul before you can ask for a trial," said Harry.

"There may be a way," said Hermione, "The question is Sirius, would you be willing to show up for a trial if Madam Bones were to guarantee you wouldn't encounter dementors?"

Padfoot paused for a few minutes to think. "Well, it would probably be better than staying in hiding, but I won't surrender until the day of my trial. Anyway, there's something else I'm curious about. If Dumbledore put those wards around your house, why can you still use your portkeys?"

Hermione smiled. "While he was setting up the wards, Harry and I were watching how he made them. I asked him how long they'd last, and he said several years. I then asked if he'd make it so that I could apparate in, as well as make portkeys. He reminded me that making my own portkeys was illegal, but made the adjustments anyway. I watched him do it. I'd already read all about those wards so I know that he really did it. He doesn't have a clue that I can already make portkeys."

Sirius chuckled. "Good."

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A few days later, right after Karate class, Harry and Hermione flooded to the Ministry of Magic to speak to Madam Bones. They had gotten a magical law book the day they'd spoken to Sirius. While they were having their wands checked, they were asked their identities and the purpose of their visit.

"I'm Harry Potter and this is Hermione Granger. We wish to speak with Madam Bones."

The ministry official looked at Harry's scar and issued them visitor badges and told them where Madam Bones' office was located. After they reached her office, Harry walked up to her secretary, who asked after glancing at them, "What are you kids doing here?"

Harry's ears turned pink. "I'm Harry Potter, and this is Hermione Granger. We'd like to speak to Madam Bones at her earliest convenience."

The secretary's eyes went up to his scar, and asked, "Hello Mr. Potter. May I ask the purpose of your visit?"

"I'm afraid that it is a private matter that is important that we wish to discuss only with Madam Bones."

"I see," the secretary said, looking a bit put out. "I'll let her know you are here." She then wrote something on a piece of paper, and then pointed her wand at it. It then folded itself into an airplane and flew into a window behind the secretary.

About a minute later, the door opened, and a voice called out, "Mr. Potter and his friend may come in."

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Harry and Hermione walked into the room to see that Amelia Bones was just closing up a cabinet that had a strange looking device Harry was not familiar with. "Is that a pensieve?" asked the ever-inquisitive Hermione.

The broad, square-jawed woman with very short gray hair who was wearing a monocle stared at the girl for a moment before answering, "Yes, Miss...?"

"Granger, madam. Hermione Granger."

"It's good to meet you Miss Granger. You too, Mr. Potter," she said, shaking both their hands before sitting behind her desk. As she motioned for them to sit in some comfortable-looking chairs in front of the desk, she said, "Now what can I do for you?"

Hermione took a deep breath and launched into the speech they'd worked out. "Well, according to a law book I've read, it's illegal to keep a suspect in Azkaban for more than one month without a trial. Is that true?"

Bones raised an eyebrow. "Yes, that's right."

"So would it be illegal if someone who'd been in there for years without a trial broke out?" asked Harry.

"Er, maybe. What's this about?"

"Sirius Black was never given a trial," said Hermione.

Madam Bones sat back in her chair. "Minister Fudge said that Mr. Potter and his friends had been confounded the night he was caught and claimed he was innocent. Am I correct in assuming that Miss Granger is one of those friends, and that you are still asserting his innocence?"

The young couple looked at each other for a moment. Each looked unsure, but they both said, "Yes."

Bones started rubbing her chin as though deep in thought. "Why don't you show me what happened inside the Shrieking Shack that night? Let me copy your memories for my pensieve. I want both of yours to make sure neither has been tampered with."

Harry and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief while smiling.

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A little while later, after reliving both kid's memories (from the time they entered the room with Sirius up to the point where they were alone in the hospital wing with Dumbledore), they exited the pensieve. Amelia looked furious. "That stupid Fudge wouldn't even listen to you! Snape didn't listen to anything! He deserved what you did to him! Fudge was gonna give him the Order of Merlin! They weren't even going to wait for Lupin's testimony!" she ranted and raved about the miscarriage of justice for a few moments before giving them an appraising look. "You had something to do with Sirius' escape, didn't you?"

Both teenagers looked at the floor as their complexions turned pink. Amelia pointed her wand at the door, causing it to glow for a second before saying, "This is strickly between us. If I'm going to help, I need to know the full truth."

"Er, yes," said Harry.

"How?"

Hermione said hesitantly, "I, er, had a time-turner for my classes, which I turned in afterward, and we used it to rescue Sirius."

Her eyes widened. "That's illegal, but then again, so is sentencing a man who never had a trial to the dementor's kiss. Let me see your memories of that. I'll let you reabsorb them so no one else sees them, but I have to know everything."

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After seeing what happened from the time when Dumbledore was alone with them until Fudge left, disappointed that Sirius had escaped, Amelia was looking at Harry with incredible admiration. "You, you conjured a corporeal Patronus that was strong enough to drive all the dementors away."

"Well, after Fudge placed them at Hogwarts, they wouldn't leave me alone. They nearly killed me in a quidditch match, so I asked Professor Lupin to show me how to defend myself against them."

"I see," said Bones with a serious look on her face. "I was against Fudge's decision to do that, but he's the minister." She took a deep breath. "I assume you have some way to communicate with Mr. Black."

"Er, yes," said Harry. "He doesn't want to give himself up for a trial and wind up back in Azkaban before the trial or worse yet getting a dementor's kiss."

Amelia smiled, "I understand. Fudge is anxious to look good to the public, and is convinced that having Black kissed is the way to improve his image. I don't suppose there's a way I could talk to him about it."

Hermione grinned. "There is, actually." She then pulled out her mirror. "Snuffles."

Sirius' image appeared in the compact mirror and said, "Hello, Hermione. To what do I owe this call?"

"Harry and I are in Amelia Bones' office, and we've shown her everything that happened on the night you escaped Hogwarts. She wants to speak to you."

Sirius sighed. "Well, I guess I should."

Hermione handed Madam Bones the mirror. She said, "Hello Mr. Black."

"Hello Madam Bones."

"I understand your fear of coming here, and quite frankly I believe that it's justified. The dementors have been ordered to kiss you on sight, so until they are otherwise ordered, you can't come here. I was hoping you could send me memories of when you talked the Potters into making Peter Pettigrew their Secret-Keeper and every memory relevant to that. Perhaps informing him of the change. If you witnessed them making him Secret-Keeper that would be excellent. Also, I want you to show what happened when you confronted Peter."

He nodded happily. "I've wanted to do that for twelve years. I'll send them today, but it will take a few days to reach you."

"I'd also like to be able to contact you. I believe Miss Granger called you 'Snuffles.' Is that correct?"

"Yes Madam Bones."

"Very well. I will do everything within my power to arrange a trial for you. Perhaps it will be a public announcement that you never received a trial and a promise of safety until after the trial if you show up. However, I want to arrange exactly when and where that will be so that I can have people to protect you from any dementors that may try to intervene. I shall keep your animagus form a secret until the trial, at which time you will be fined for not registering. However, if things go well, you'll be granted more than the fine for compensation for the serious miscarriage of justice that you have suffered. You will have to show up on the day of your trial, so plan on it. I'll be keeping this whole affair a secret from Fudge until that day."

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After getting a request and permission to make Madam Bones a two-way mirror, Hermione did so. She and Harry left the office after collecting their time-travel memories from the pensieve. They then portkeyed back to the Granger residence to spend the rest of the day playing like toddlers on the swing set and then going swimming.

The rest of the week went by quickly, and before they knew it, it was Friday, and they were studying magical travel again. They started out with charming carpets, but found that the charms were so similar to brooms that within fifteen minutes, they'd each created a flying carpet (that they'd never show anyone because they were illegal). They spent the rest of the lesson starting to learn how to put something on the floo network. They learned that it doesn't need a chimney. In fact it doesn't require anything but a fire. You could actually put a campfire on a floo network.

They got to work learning how to transfigure things into a fireplace bottom that can safely contain a fire. After they learned that, they had to learn specific charms to put on it to connect it to a private floo

network. Hermione successfully flooed to Grimmauld Place's fireplace (which she charmed to allow to belong to a private floo network, requiring a password) before the lesson was over. Harry had just finished transfiguring his miniature fireplace, while Ginny was about three-quarters done with that.

Neville did manage to get his yellow belt that day, so both Harry and Hermione congratulated him after the karate class. Harry and Hermione went out to dinner and a movie that night and had a good time.

Saturday morning, before they portkeyed to Grimmauld Place, a letter arrived for Hermione by a ministry owl. When they opened it, they found that it was from Amelia Bones.

"Hello Harry and Hermione,

I addressed this to Hermione instead of Harry so that the name wouldn't call attention to this letter. Sirius Black will have a trial on Monday, July 23rd at 10 a.m. I have already discussed the manner in which he will arrive for his trial with him, but don't want to discuss these issues in a letter that could be intercepted. Both of you, as well as Ronald Weasley, Remus Lupin, Severus Snape, and Albus Dumbledore will be summoned to the trial. Minister Fudge believes that it is nothing more than an official review of Sirius Black's case, and that's what the summons will say. My plan is to show all the evidence for Sirius' innocence and then, once we've proven his innocence, have him make an appearance to testify on his own behalf.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones"

"Well," said Harry, "That looks like good news. In nine days Sirius could be cleared."

"I can't wait to show the letter to Moony!"

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Chapter 14 – A Sirius Trial

As would naturally be expected, Lupin and Ron were happy Sirius would have a trial. Harry and Hermione decided not to let Dumbledore know that it was a trial, just in case the headmaster would feel compelled to inform Snape of the true nature of his summons. The nine days passed by quickly, and before they knew it, Harry and Hermione were seated inside a courtroom with Madam Bones and Minister Fudge at the front. The Wizengamot was assembled, but because Albus Dumbledore was a witness, he was not seated with them. Harry noticed that Dumbledore was seated on the other side of the room, next to Snape, who was glaring at Harry.

Harry tensed up immediately on seeing the gothic, greasy-haired git who was responsible for his parents' death. He felt Hermione squeeze his hand. "Ignore him, Harry. We both know what he is, but doing anything about it will cause trouble. Just imagine his face when Sirius' name is cleared. That will bother him more than anything you could say to him."

Harry took a deep breath, looked into his girlfriend's eyes, and smiled. "You know just what to say. I can last through this trial to see that."

"Hi guys, er, mind if I sit here?" said a nervous-looking Ron who had obviously just arrived.

"Sure," said Hermione, "but I think they'll be calling us all out of the room soon."

The red-haired boy sat down, and five minutes later, Lupin joined them. True to Hermione's prediction, within just a few minutes of Lupin's arrival, the witnesses were all led away to separate rooms.

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Once Harry was led into his room, the official who'd escorted him there administered veritaserum to Harry so he couldn't lie and extracted the memories they wanted from him (from the moment he entered the Shrieking Shack until he was alone in the hospital wing with Hermione, Ron, and Dumbledore), placing them in a small vial labeled, 'Exhibit C – Harry Potter's Testimony.'

Once this was done, he was left alone. He'd been informed that the order of testimony would be Snape, Ron, himself, Hermione, Lupin, Dumbledore, and finally as a surprise Sirius Black. The format of this trial would be that the witness would be escorted into the court, and then everyone would be shown the pensieve memory. After that, the witness would receive another dose of veritaserum and be questioned about the memory they provided, and nothing else. He sat in silence waiting for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, the door opened and a woman in ministry robes escorted him to the courtroom. He sat down, doing his best to resist the urge to hex Snape, who was now sitting in the courtroom looking rather pleased with himself. 'That murderer probably thinks he did a great job showing how guilty Sirius is!' He closed his eyes, willing himself to calm down before he ruined Padfoot's trial.

He watched as his memories were placed into a special pensieve that magnified the memories big and loud enough for everyone to watch without going inside it. They then showed everything Harry remembered from that night. After Harry drank more veritaserum, Fudge asked the first question, strutting over to Harry like the pompous fool he was. He looked condescendingly at Harry. "Harry, my boy, isn't it true that Sirius Black confunded you that night?"

"No, sir."

Fudge appeared a bit nervous. "You, er, may not realize that you were confunded, but you know that there are gaps in your memory of that night."

"No, sir. I remember that night perfectly."

Fudge looked around for support until Amelia Bones said, "I saw no evidence in Mr. Potter's memory of uncertainty. It seems that Mr. Potter remembers that night quite clearly, including the small fraction of the conversation Professor Snape witnessed. I believe you were going to give him an Order of Merlin for interfering with that conversation."

"Harry Potter attacked a professor!" snapped Fudge.

“Snape was attacking another professor, and he was gonna have Sirius kissed by the dementors without letting him explain what happened. He refused to listen to reason,” said Harry calmly, under the influence of veritaserum.

Fudge’s ears turned red as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. “Well then, I believe I have no further questions for Mr. Potter.”

Harry stepped down and sat in a seat while the affects of the potion wore off. He watched Hermione’s memories, which matched his exactly. Fudge elected not to question her as his neck got redder. Harry glanced at Snape, who looked very angry. By the time Lupin had left the stand, Fudge’s whole face was red.

Dumbledore then showed his memories of the Potters telling him they were using Black for their Secret-Keeper, and then his conversation with Fudge about the rush to bring a dementor into the castle to kiss Black right away. It also showed a conversation Dumbledore had with Sirius immediately before his escape from Hogwarts, wherein Black explained it all to him.

Amelia Bones asked Dumbledore (after he’d been given veritaserum), “Did you witness the Fidelius Charm being placed on the Potter’s house in Godric’s Hollow?”

“No, Madam Bones,” said Albus.

“Then how can you prove that Sirius Black was indeed their Secret-Keeper?”

“I cannot, Madam Bones.”

“Did you set Black free!” demanded Fudge angrily.

“No, Minister Fudge, I did not.”

“Enough, Minister Fudge,” said Madam Bones. “I believe that questions must only be about a witness’ testimony according to our laws. I do believe that at this moment the majority of the Wizengamot realizes that Sirius Black has suffered a severe miscarriage of justice, and according to Article 182 Section F of our Wizarding Constitution,

any official meeting where all relevant parties are present at may be turned into a trial. I hereby request that this meeting become the many years overdue trial of Sirius Black.”

Fudge laughed. “Not every relevant party is present. I don’t see Sirius Black anywhere.”

Bones looked at Fudge with contempt. “If he had come by any means you were aware of, a dementor would have kissed him before he arrived at his trial. I therefore took it upon myself to offer him safe passage here. Auror Shacklebolt, bring in Sirius Black.”

Fudge stood where he was in complete shock, as Sirius Black, surrounded by four aurors, walked into the courtroom, and took the stand. Harry grinned as he looked over at Snape, whose normally pale face was red with fury. A vial of his memories was placed into the pensieve, and soon everyone was watching Sirius Black’s side of the story.

It first showed him suggesting to James and Lily that Wormtail be the Secret-Keeper. Then it showed him watching the spell performed and telling Pettigrew to be careful. It then showed him confront Pettigrew, and clearly showed that Peter was the one who killed all those muggles. It even showed Peter cutting off his own finger and transforming into Scabbers. It showed Sirius being thrown into Azkaban after being beaten by the guards on Barty Crouch’s orders while he watched in satisfaction. After the beating, Crouch told Black that filth like him didn’t deserve a trial. It then showed Sirius borrowing Fudge’s newspaper and recognizing Wormtail in the picture of the Weasley family. It then showed him sneaking into the Gryffindor common room looking for Pettigrew and waking Ron up. It showed him pulling Ron and Scabbers into the Shrieking shack and everything that happened there, and finally his conversation with Dumbledore.

Amelia Bones first said, “I believe that an investigation into the affairs of Barty Crouch should be started at once, and that the relevant section of this memory be copied for use in that investigation.” Black was given veritaserum and Amelia Bones asked him, “Why did you suggest that Pettigrew be the Potter’s Secret-Keeper?”

“So that even if I was captured and tortured, there was absolutely no way I could betray them. I thought Lily, James, and Harry would be safe that way.”

“After what we’ve seen, I have no further questions about this testimony,” said Bones.

Fudge, who was now pale, said, “I have no questions either.”

“Then I suggest a vote of the Wizengamot. All who believe Sirius Black to be not guilty of being a Death Eater, raise your hand.” Every hand went up. “All who believe Sirius Black did not betray the Potters, raise your hand.” Every hand went up (those who would’ve wanted to be contrary were afraid to in front of this evidence). “All who believe that Sirius Black is not guilty of the murders for which he was imprisoned, raise your hands.” Every hand went up again. Harry noticed Snape slipping quietly out the door. “All who believe that Sirius Black should be entitled to compensation for his unjust imprisonment, raise your hand.” At this point, about two-thirds of the Wizengamot raised their hands, which was enough. Madam Bones then declared, “I believe our laws state that proper compensation for unjust imprisonment in Azkaban is 1,000 Galleons per month. Sirius was imprisoned for eleven years and nine months. I believe that comes to 141,000 Galleons. Am I correct, Minister Fudge?”

Fudge had his head down, and barely raised it to nod. He looked like he was attending his own funeral.

Amelia smiled. “Good. We will make sure that it is transferred to the Black vault today. We’ll also declare Peter Pettigrew alive and issue out a warrant for his arrest. We’ll also revoke his Order of Merlin. That’s almost all of our business here, except that I believe Mr. Black wishes to confess to a minor misdemeanor. Isn’t that true?” she said, looking directly at the obviously thrilled Sirius Black.

“Yes ma’am,” he said, and then transformed into a dog, astonishing most people in there. After about thirty seconds, he transformed back. “I’m an illegal animagus. That’s how I escaped Azkaban. Dementors have a difficult time sensing animals. I wish to register today.”

Madam Bones nodded. "The fee for becoming an illegal animagus is 1,000 Galleons, and the fee for registering is 100 Galleons. Both will be deducted from your compensation. You'll just have to fill out the appropriate parchment work. A witch that can handle that is present in the court at this time." At that moment, a plump, black-haired witch started walking toward Sirius with three of the largest scrolls of parchment he'd ever seen, along with a quill and five bottles of ink. He vaguely heard Madam Bones adjourn the court as he realized he'd need to fill out the forms three times.

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Harry and Hermione waited over an hour for Sirius to complete the forms. Ron told them to congratulate Padfoot for him as he left to return to the Burrow. Dumbledore and Lupin both had nodded to Sirius at their departures, but the young couple wanted to actually talk to Sirius. When he finally finished, Harry and Hermione rushed up to him. Sirius hugged Harry tightly. "I don't know how to thank you and Hermione! I can't believe I'm a free man again!" He then released Harry and embraced Hermione. He then looked at Harry. The first thing I'm gonna do is fill out more parchmentwork. I want to apply for your guardianship, if that's all right with you."

Harry could hardly dare to believe what he was hearing. "You...you really do want to adopt me?"

"Of course I do, as long as you want me to."

"Of course I want you to adopt me! You are my godfather, after all!"

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Chapter 15 – Coming Home

After Sirius had filled out all the paperwork for adopting Harry, he, Harry, and Hermione walked to the main atrium of the ministry, where Sirius said quietly, “I’d suggest you floo to my house rather than use your portkeys. You don’t want to be caught with them by the ministry.”

“Good idea,” said Hermione, and so Sirius apparated while the two teenagers flooed.

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Sirius arrived at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place for the first time in years to find that the lights were out, as he expected. He knew that everybody had lives of their own and couldn’t wait around for him while he filled out form after bloody form. He was a bit surprised that Remus hadn’t had time to speak with him after the trial, but he figured Moony probably had something important to do. Sirius vowed to make sure to visit his oldest and dearest friend tomorrow. He pulled out his first wand, which had been returned to him when he left the courtroom after all those years, and turned on the magical lights and watched as Hermione and then Harry came through the fireplace.

Hermione said, “I think I’ll leave you two alone to talk. I need to tell my parents the good news. Congratulations again, Sirius!” She then muttered something and disappeared as Harry and Sirius bid her goodbye.

Sirius turned to Harry awkwardly. “Well, er, I guess we’re part of the way to my becoming your guardian.”

“Er, yes we are. I’m really thankful that you want to adopt me.”

Padfoot looked into Harry’s eyes. “I know it might seem a bit awkward living together when we haven’t known each other for two months yet, but I know it’ll work out.”

Harry smiled. “I know it’ll be better than the Dursleys!”

Sirius frowned for a moment, but then smiled again as he looked around. "The living room looks great! I hardly recognize the place! Why don't you show me everything your decorator has done?"

Sirius started walking toward the stairs before he was stopped by a soft pop and a few crashed behind him. He spun around, wand at the ready, to find, "Remus!" along with Hermione, Adam Granger, Marissa Granger, Ginny, Ron, Fred, George, Molly, Arthur, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Dumbledore. Many of them were holding a portkey. By the smile on Harry's face, Sirius could tell that this was planned.

The werewolf walked up to Sirius and embraced him like a brother. "You didn't think I'd just leave without saying anything, did you? I had to help get everything ready once we knew the verdict."

"Get what ready?" asked Sirius.

"This," said Albus, as he tapped his wand onto what seemed like mid-air, only to reveal that a table filled with gifts had been disillusioned.

In the meantime, Hermione had walked over to the kitchen and opened the door, which caused their senses to be bombarded by the aromas of a great feast. The brunette said, while pointing at Molly, "Mrs. Weasley made all this and charmed it to stay hot, and then I charmed the door to stop the smell of food from leaving the kitchen."

Sirius turned to Mrs. Weasley, and said charmingly, "Thank you very much for putting forth all that effort for someone you didn't even know. This looks like an excellent feast."

Molly blushed. "Well, after Ron, Ginny, Remus, and Albus all vouched for your innocence, I figured you probably haven't had a decent meal for the last thirteen years."

Sirius chuckled. "Well, I had a few good meals where I've been hiding for the past month, but nothing like this. It's good to meet you."

"I'm Arthur Weasley," said Molly's husband as he stretched out his arm to shake Sirius' hand. "It's good to meet you. Congratulations!"

Sirius smiled and shook Arthur's hand. "I got my life back!"

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They ate the feast, which included a cake that had a moving picture of a bird flying out of a cage made of frosting.

Sirius' presents consisted mainly of new clothes, although Harry got him a fancy gold watch and Hermione gave him a leather jacket. Hagrid gave him a black helmet. He said, "I got yer motorcycle in da dueling room here. By the way, thanks fer havin' Buckbeak, I mean, Witherwings, brought back to the forest. I 'ad Professor Dumbledore charm 'is wings to be black so he won't be recognized."

Sirius said, "Thanks for keeping the bike for me," and walked into the appropriate room and looked with the expression of a kid who'd been told Christmas was coming twice this year. The bike had obviously been polished and looked almost brand new. "When this party's over, I'm gonna take a drive!" he declared. He looked around the room and noticed the Quidditch hoops, but decided not to say anything while Dumbledore was there.

Albus asked him, "Now that you're a free man once again, what do you intend to do?"

"Besides adopt Harry? I don't know yet."

"You could always try returning to your old job."

"Be an auror again?" Sirius shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I couldn't believe how fast my 'friends' turned against me! I'm still mad at them! Not to mention that I don't think I could willingly send anybody to the Dementors anymore! It'd be more merciful to kill them!" Sirius took a deep breath. "Anyway, I don't need the money, so I can take all the time I need to figure out what to do with my time."

"Would you consider teaching at Hogwarts?"

Sirius looked really surprised. "Er, teach? Well. I never considered that. I was more like the Anti-Teacher during my years as a student."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That means you probably know every trick in the book that the students will try on you."

Sirius chuckled. "Probably. What position did you have in mind?"

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts position, as well as that of Potions Master, are available."

Sirius smiled. "Pick up where Moony left off? Hm. That might be fun. Plus, it would keep me keep an eye on Harry."

"So will you take the Defense position?" asked Dumbledore eagerly.

"Just a minute. I want to ask Harry how he feels about it." He then turned around and saw Harry talking to Hermione. "Harry, Hermione," he called, "Could you come here for a minute?"

"Sure," said Harry, as they made their way over to him, "What's up?"

"Well, Professor Dumbledore has just offered me the Defense teacher position. I wanted to know what you thought about that."

Harry and Hermione's faces lit up. "That's great!" said Hermione enthusiastically. "When you were supposed to be after Harry, I read about your history. You were an auror before everything happened. I'll bet you know loads of information about defense that we don't find in our textbooks."

Sirius' ears turned pink. "I guess I know a thing or two. What do you think, Harry?"

"I think it'd be awesome to have you there!"

"Then I'll take the job, but remember I can't show you favoritism," said Sirius, "only Snape's allowed to do that."

"Now Sirius," said Dumbledore, "That's not a fair assessment."

"Do you have a record of how many points each teacher gives and takes per year?" asked Sirius.

Dumbledore's ears went pink. "Er, yes."

"And how many points did Snape give and take from each house last year?"

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and pointed it at his watch. A green 953 appeared in the air with a green 0 below it. Next to it, a red 0 appeared with a red 848 below it. Next to the green, a blue 32 appeared with a blue 364 below it. Finally, next to that a yellow 45 appeared with a yellow 531 below it. (Slytherin was green, Gryffindor was red, Ravenclaw was blue, and Hufflepuff was yellow). Dumbledore's eyes widened as he looked at how Snape had not taken any points from Slytherin, and how he had not given any points to Gryffindor. Not to mention the enormous amount of points he'd given to Slytherin and taken from Gryffindor.

"You see," said Sirius, "Snape makes the house cup a joke. That's why Slytherin won every year Snape taught before Harry came to Hogwarts. Not because they were better students."

Harry added icily, "I've seen that murderer take points from Hermione for answering a question correctly in class."

"Harry, you will refer to him as Professor Snape," said Dumbledore.

"How would you refer to someone responsible for your parents' deaths, sir?" said Harry coldly.

"Using language I don't allow at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore with a sigh. "But I do expect you to avoid Professor Snape as much as possible, but if you happen to meet him in the hall, be civil."

"While he takes 100 points from me for breathing," said Harry with a smirk. "Fine, but if he starts trouble with me, I won't promise not to call him what he is."

Albus sighed. "I hope that will be sufficient. I shall make a record of the points Professor Snape has given and taken since he became a professor and speak to him about it, but it shouldn't affect his current potions project anyway."

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The party went on for a while, and Ginny took Sirius aside and asked permission to use the dueling room with Neville at night. He said, "I don't mind. I might even give you guys some pointers."

After everybody but Harry and Hermione left (her parents said she could stay a few more hours), they talked for a little while about where Sirius had been hiding, the one thing he never told them over the mirror or in a letter for fear of being caught. He also told a few 'Marauder stories' that he hadn't talked about yet and asked about the adventures Harry and Hermione had at Hogwarts so far. They also gave Sirius the grand tour of the house while they were talking, and Sirius liked it a lot. He also had them explain why Quidditch hoops were in the dueling room. He thought the idea of indoor Quidditch was interesting, and couldn't wait to try it. After a few hours, Sirius said, "You two should get back to the Grangers' house. Harry, you can move your stuff in here tomorrow if you'd like, or you can stay where you're at until I have custody. It's up to you."

Harry looked thoughtful for a few moments while both Hermione and Sirius faced him. "I think I'd like to stay with the Grangers until the end of the month. That's about a week away. It'll give you a chance to get settled in before I have to. Then we'll have a month together before Hogwarts."

"That's fine. I think it's time to try out my bike!" said Sirius as he started rolling it toward the front door.

"Can I come?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Not this time, cub. I want to make sure that it's still working right. Hagrid said he hasn't used it since the night he dropped you on the Dursleys' doorstep. He didn't want to be seen with a 'murderer's' motorcycle after I was arrested, so he hid it somewhere no one would find it."

-

The next morning, after Harry and Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place for their training, they found Sirius sitting in the kitchen staring at the morning's paper. Ginny walked in behind them as Hermione said, "What's happened?"

Sirius looked up. "Read it for yourself," and turned the paper on the table toward them.

“High Ranking Ministry Official Bartemius Crouch Caught Harboring a Fugitive – Auror Killed as Fugitive Escapes

By Rita Skeeter

Bartemius Crouch Sr., head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, was caught last evening with his son, Bartemius Crouch Jr., a convicted Death Eater believed to have died in Azkaban, resting in a bed, covered by an invisibility cloak and under the unforgivable Imperius Curse which his father had cast upon him. Aurors visited that home when an investigation based off of evidence presented at the trial which proved Sirius Black was innocent of the crimes that Crouch Sr. had thrown him into Azkaban without a trial for began (see page 2). Unfortunately, Crouch Jr. managed to break the bewitchment and escape, killing one of the aurors, Matthew Hill, by breaking his neck and then taking his wand. Crouch Jr. of course, had participated in the torture of the aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom, which has left them insane and at St. Mungo's to this very day, so he is to be considered highly dangerous. When asked for comments, neither the Longbottom's son Neville nor Frank Longbottom's mother had anything to say, although their eyes were glistening with the ghost of their past...”

The article went on to say that Crouch Sr. was taken to Azkaban and a trial date was set for August 3rd, and that he is expected to either be sentenced to either life in Azkaban or the Dementor's Kiss. It also mentioned how ruthless he'd been toward the end of the war.

Ginny looked at the others sadly. “Did you know about Neville's parents?”

“No,” said Harry and Hermione together.

“I did,” said Sirius. “I remember when Crouch Jr. was taken to Azkaban. I wonder how he escaped.”

“I can't believe I never thought to ask Neville about his parents,” said Ginny.

“Neither did we,” said Harry sadly.

"I guess I'll have to talk to him about it." All of the sudden, Ginny started giggling uncontrollably. "Mr. Crouch! That's the man that Percy idolizes so much! I wonder what that prat thinks about the man he's been quoting nonstop since he started working now!"

"He'll be devastated," said Hermione with a frown on her face. "It's not funny."

"It is if you've been living with him as he goes on and on about how great Crouch is! I just wish I could've seen the look on his face when he showed up at work today! I can't wait for him to get home so I can watch the twins harass him! I think I'll ask him, 'Do you think Mr. Crouch will want a report about prison bar thickness?'"

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Chapter 17 – Changes

A miserable-looking young man with red hair walked through the door with his head hung down. He knew he'd get taunted at home. He glanced up to see exactly what he'd expected.

"Hello Percy. How was work?" asked Fred innocently.

Percy's ears turned red. "Just fine," he said coldly.

"Has Mr. Crouch assigned you any new reports to do?" added George. The red had now spread into Percy's cheeks.

"Perhaps one on prison bar thickness?" suggested Ginny.

Percy's whole face was red, and he responded, "Mr. Crouch is no longer at the ministry. He made a mistake he...."

"That's not what you said yesterday," said Fred.

"Or the day before," said George.

"Or the weeks before that!" said Ginny. "You've been worshipping the ground that criminal walks on since you started working for him, and he is a criminal! You've insulted all of us, claiming how much better than us Crouch is."

"You've been licking the boots of a real lawbreaker..." said Fred.

"While acting like making a little noise was a crime," said George.

"I HAVE NOT BEEN LICKING HIS BOOTS!" yelled Percy.

Ginny did her best Percy imitation. "Oh Mr. Crouch is of the opinion..."

Fred joined in. "Mr. Crouch can speak so many languages."

George added, "I've left Penelope for Mr. Crouch. We'll be married soon."

"Is he still your role model, Percy?" asked Ginny.

"I'm sure he had a good reason..."

"To break a Death Eater out of Azkaban?" suggested Molly, who'd just walked in. She'd been putting up with Percy's Crouch worship as much as anyone else.

"Or keep his own son under the Imperius Curse?" said Arthur, who'd been with Molly.

"My question is why he'd bother to break him out just to be a prisoner at home," said Molly.

"I used to think, along with everybody at the ministry besides you, Mr. Crouch had a heart of stone," said Mr. Weasley, "but I was wrong. To do that to his own son, your idol must not have any heart at all."

"But he was so dedicated to the rules..."

"That he broke the most important ones," said Arthur. He sighed. "So, did you find anyone to give you a job? I know you were running around from department to department."

"He lost his job?" asked Ginny.

"Well," said Arthur, "Percy had gotten the person who took over his department in trouble with Mr. Crouch for getting back from lunch five minutes late while he was visiting his wife in St. Mungos last week. The first thing he did was fire Percy."

"The rules state that the lunch break is exactly..."

"Nobody I talked to wanted to hire Percy. They've all heard him worshipping Crouch in the lunch room and think Percy's a joke."

"For your information father, I did find another position in the ministry!" snapped Percy. "I'm now assistant to the Senior Undersecretary to Minister Fudge himself, Madam Umbridge," he said proudly.

Arthur's jaw dropped. "You're working for that bi..."

“Arthur!” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “You must mind your language no matter whom you’re describing, although I admit it’s hard not to when it’s that...woman.”

Percy’s face was getting redder. “I’ll have you know that...”

“Who’s Madam Umbridge?” Ginny asked her father, interrupting Percy.

“Last year,” answered Arthur, “she proposed a law that forces muggleborns to obey anything a pureblood tells them. Virtually making them slaves! Naturally, it didn’t get passed. If she weren’t so close to Fudge, she’d have ruined her career in the ministry for her bigotry.”

“That was just a misunderstanding,” said Percy firmly. “What she and Mr. Malfoy, who helped her draft that bill, were trying to say is that pureblood families like ours deserve respect, and that muggleborns who just waltz into our world taking over...”

“DON’T YOU DARE SPEAK THAT WAY ABOUT MUGGLEBORNS!” shouted Mrs. Weasley over the rest of what Percy was saying. The kids were watching silently in shock over what their brother was defending.

“But it’s true when you think about,” said Percy calmly. “Look at how many positions in the ministry are now being held by them, while pureblood wizards like myself have trouble finding work.”

Arthur was really getting upset, but he decided to find out just what his son thought. He calmly stated, “Perhaps we could investigate the possibility of keeping muggleborns from applying for work at the ministry. That way we could at least keep the jobs that we have.”

“Exactly,” said Percy. “You see, Madam Umbridge...”

“Is a bigot, and I’m sorry to say you are too.” said Arthur sadly.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS!” shouted Molly. “I RAISED YOU TO BE BETTER THAN...”

"If you'll just listen to Madam Umbridge," said Percy condescendingly as though speaking to five-year-olds. "She's done so much research into..."

"GET OUT!" shouted Molly through tears. "I WILL NOT LIVE IN THE SAME HOUSE WITH A BIGOT!!! I CAN'T BELIEVE..."

"FINE!" shouted Percy, "Just let me get my stuff!" He turned and stormed up the stairs while Molly silently sobbed. Five minutes later Percy wordlessly walked down the stairs with his old trunk floating behind him and stepped outside the door, slamming it behind him.

The other Weasleys, even the twins, were silent until a few minutes later Ginny, who was weeping, softly said, "I...I can't believe that...that Percy would just suddenly become...prejudiced like that. That's one step away from being a...a Death Eater."

"I don't think he really believes that," said Fred.

"He just takes on whatever philosophy his boss has," said George.

"I...I think you're right boys," said Mr. Weasley. "I hope you are."

At that moment, Ron walked into the house carrying a broomstick. "Hi. I just saw Percy apparate away with a trunk. Is he going on a vacation?"

-

At the same time, Harry and Hermione were just coming back into the house after a fun-filled afternoon of playing on the swing set, kissing, swimming, and kissing. As Hermione walked up the stairs to change into regular clothes, Harry found himself wishing she'd always wear a bathing suit. He shook that thought out of his head and walked up to his room. He then dried himself the rest of the way and changed his clothes. He then opened his door so Hermione would know he was dressed and started reading the Ancient Runes book.

It wasn't long until Hermione entered the room wearing a pair of green-blue shorts and a loose light-blue t-shirt. He looked up from his book when he heard her walk in and close the door. Her hair was in a

messy ponytail and her skin was slightly wrinkled from the pool, but he thought she was breathtaking. "How is it that I spent all that time with you at Hogwarts and never realized how incredibly beautiful you are?"

She blushed at that statement, but said. "Maybe you should have your contact lenses checked. I'm not even wearing nice..."

"It's not what you're wearing or your hairstyle or anything like that. There's just something about you that is...I don't know...enchanted. Maybe it's your eyes or your smile. Maybe it's your kindness or..."

"Maybe it's how much you love me that makes me beautiful to you," Hermione suggested while smiling at Harry.

He smiled back. "I doubt very much I'm the only guy who thinks you're gorgeous."

"My dad doesn't count," she countered with a smirk.

He marked his place in the book he was reading and walked up to her, taking her hands in his. "Hermione, you shouldn't put yourself down." He took a deep breath as he gazed in her brown eyes. "Maybe you are more beautiful to me than anyone else, but that doesn't mean you're not beautiful. I...I wish you could see yourself the way I see you." He touched her right cheek with one hand, while holding her hands with his other. "You would see a radiant angel who has done nothing but try to help people from the moment I met her. The first time we met you were helping Neville find Trevor. Since we became friends, you've helped me more times than I could ever count." He then walked her over to a mirror and stood next to her and started pointing things out. "I know you hate it, but I love your hair that is hard to control, untamable like yourself. When you know you're in the right, nothing can stop you. Those eyes that show wisdom, combined with a little mischief, that always show me whether you're happy or sad or angry. I'm sorry for every time I caused your eyes to lose their happiness."

He rubbed her cheek lightly with his finger and continued as she watched his eyes, looking for any sign of deceit or humor. "Your skin is so soft and smooth, and just has to be kissed." He kissed her

cheek where he'd just touched her. He then kissed the top of her nose, earning a chuckle from her.

"My nose that won't stay out of your business," she said laughing.

He chuckled for a moment, and then replied, "I don't want you to stay out of my business anymore." He then looked at, "Your lips, that I so much want to...."

She beat him to it by aggressively pulling his head down and kissing him passionately. After about thirty seconds, Harry felt something outside his closed lips trying to gain entrance. Realizing that it was her tongue, he parted his lips, allowing entrance.

-

Not too much later, the Grangers arrived home, and the teenagers told them how Percy's boss that he worships who had thrown Sirius in prison without a trial had just been caught earning at least a life sentence in Azkaban, if not worse.

-

The next morning at Sirius' house, Ginny told them what happened with Percy, which left Hermione shocked. "Does he...he never acted like...does he really feel that way about muggleborns?"

Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, but that's what he's claiming now. I thought he just felt superior to everyone. Fred and George think he's just acting like that to suck up to his new boss."

"Even at home?" asked Harry.

"Yes. He wouldn't want her to find out he's lying when he agrees with her at work."

"No offense Ginny, but I think Percy should've been a Slytherin," said Sirius.

"None taken. In fact, I'll bet that's what the sorting hat would say if he was put on Percy's head now."

Hermione then changed the subject. "Did you see Neville last night Ginny?"

She looked sad. "Yes, and I asked why he never told anybody about his parents, and apologized for never asking him."

"What'd he say?" asked Harry.

"No one asked him, but he'd rather not go through what Harry does with people asking about his parents. He visits them a lot at St. Mungo's. He's going to bring me with him in a few days."

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The next few days flew by quickly as Harry and Hermione trained, studied, and snogged, and before they knew it, it was July 31st, Harry's birthday, the day before he'd move in with Sirius.

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Chapter 18 – Going Places

Harry woke up on his birthday determined to continue his training schedule. It never even occurred to him that he might have a birthday party. He went downstairs to exercise and met Hermione already there.

“Happy Birthday, Harry,” she said just before kissing him.

He smiled and said, “Thanks!” He frowned for a moment upon realizing that no one had ever spoken those words to him before. He’d seen them in a letter, but never heard them.

“What?” asked Hermione, who’d noticed the expression on his face.

He plastered a fake smile on his face. “Nothing. Thanks.” He then quickly kissed her.

Not being fooled for one second, Hermione asked, “What is it? Is something wrong?”

He sighed and realized that he couldn’t keep a secret from his girlfriend if he wanted to. “I, er, just realized that you’re the first person ever to wish me a happy birthday. The Dursleys never even acknowledged them. I know it’s stupid, but...”

He was cut off by Hermione throwing her arms around him and sobbing. “It’s not stupid to be angry about that. What is stupid is Dumbledore leaving you with those...people!”

Harry angrily said, “He thought it was safe.”

Hermione frowned. “So is Azkaban.”

“It’s probably more pleasant, too.”

Hermione took a deep breath and smiled. “You’re not with them now, and you never have to see them again! That’s a reason to celebrate!”

“You’re right! I’m not letting them ruin this birthday! They’ve already ruined enough of them!”

Hermione looked at her boyfriend. "Are you sure you want to train today?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. Let's exercise."

They did their morning exercises while Mrs. Granger snuck downstairs and started making breakfast. When Harry walked into the kitchen to prepare to cook, he was surprised to see her there. "Happy birthday, Harry!" she said and pulled him into a quick hug which he awkwardly returned. "Now, why don't you shower quickly so we can have your birthday breakfast?"

-

When he finished showering, he found that Mr. Granger was also downstairs and wished him a happy birthday. While Hermione took her shower, Harry chatted with her parents about his plans for moving out the next day. They assured him that it had been a pleasure having him when he thanked them for their hospitality. When Hermione came downstairs, breakfast was served. Harry was given a stack of pancakes with a candle shaped like a '1' and another like a '4' that he blew out, making a wish for every birthday to start out as pleasantly as this one.

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At Grimmauld place, both Sirius and Ginny wished him a happy birthday when he and Hermione portkeyed there. In the animagus training they had that day Harry was finally able to turn his left hand into a paw. In the weeks since they found out their forms, they'd spent a lot of time concentrating on making the change with little results. Ginny had been able to grow one feather without changing form at all, and Hermione had been able to make her ears pointy, causing Harry to say she looked like Spock from Star Trek. After Hermione had slapped Harry's arm she reluctantly explained to a confused Ginny and Sirius who Spock was. Harry was the first to actually fully change any body part to look like it should. Sirius said that the paw was even the right size for a lion.

When the two hours devoted to that were done, they all headed to the dueling room. Sirius had started helping them as soon as he was

cleared. In dueling, he'd watch their duels and offer advice for the first half-hour, and then he'd join in. So far the only way they'd beaten him was by ganging up on them. Harry and Sirius both wanted Harry to be able to take on all of them and Lupin, who still joined them on Saturday. When he was there, they'd have teams where the three kids were against the two adults. At this point the adults were kicking the kids' behinds. The plan was that when the three kids started regularly beating the two adults, Ginny would switch sides, followed eventually by Hermione. Once they reached that stage, they planned on finding others to help. The goal was for Harry to be able to fight off as many people at once as possible since he was the chosen one (although they didn't tell Ginny the reason - just that he wanted to be the best). They didn't expect to reach that phase for at least a year.

Another exercise that had been added on Mondays when they studied defensive magic was to spend fifteen minutes each in the dueling room without a wand being shot at by Sirius, only able to physically dodge spells. Harry and Hermione, who'd been exercising and taking karate, were better at this than Ginny, but she wasn't that bad.

In their magical travel lessons, they'd all learned to charm brooms and magic carpets. They'd learned to make portkeys and to put any fire (including a campfire) onto a private floo network (specifically to go to Grimmauld Place). The only thing left from that book to learn was apparition, which they'd start learning the next day.

They'd continued increasing their magical potential, and Lupin (who got interested when they told him about their early results) had even found a way to charm an object to measure how much magical force it had been hit with, so they were tracking their progress. There was improvement every week when they tested it. Not very much, but always some improvement. At the rate they were going, Sirius and Remus felt that the kids would be as magically powerful as most Death Eaters within a year.

Occlumency was going well. Remus had to put forth more effort to read their minds every week. He felt that by the time school started, he wouldn't be able to read them at all and would ask Dumbledore to take over.

When the dueling was over Harry and Hermione portkeyed back to her house to eat a quick lunch and ride their bikes to karate class. They briefly chatted with Neville, who seemed to be hiding something.

While they were bicycling back, Harry commented, "Neville seemed nervous. Do you think he's not telling us something?"

Hermione's ears went pink, but Harry, who was paying attention to where he was going, didn't notice. She said, "I'm sure it's just your imagination, Harry. What could Neville possibly be hiding?"

"I don't know," admitted Harry, "He was probably just nervous about class."

When they got back home, Hermione said, "Mum and Dad want to take us out to eat for your birthday if that's alright with you."

Harry grinned. "That sounds nice."

"I told them we want to disguise ourselves, so we'd like to all portkey to Sirius' house at five so we can change our appearance and then go out to a nice dinner for your birthday?"

Harry smiled at this idea. "Alright. I guess I should study more runes and start packing up my stuff before then if I'm gonna move tomorrow. Maybe I can bring some of it with me."

-

At about 4:30, Harry and Hermione were packing up most of his things into his new trunk with the door was open. As he was adding more and more stuff to it, Harry realized that finding things inside it could become a problem. He knew he could do a summoning charm at Grimmauld Place and at Hogwarts if he couldn't find something, but he didn't want to have to. It was set so that the top of the pile was always the last thing you put in there. He mentioned this problem to Hermione, who said, "That's why a lot of trunks like these have separate compartments. What you got at Flourish and Blotts is the basic trunk, which is the only one they sell. There's another shop in Diagon Alley that specializes in trunks, and has all kinds of options

they can add. If you really want to do that, why don't we take the trunk over there Saturday after you've had a chance to empty it?"

Harry grinned at his girlfriend. "Sounds like a great idea. Why didn't you suggest it when I bought the trunk?"

Hermione blushed. "Honestly, I was too excited about all the books you bought that I didn't think of it."

About that time, Adam Granger walked up to the open doorway and said, "Hi guys."

"Hi daddy," said Hermione with a grin.

"Hey Adam," said Harry.

"Marissa wanted me to remind you that we'll be leaving in less than a half hour."

"Thanks Adam," said Harry, "But you really didn't have to..."

"We wanted to, Harry."

-

At exactly five o'clock, the four of them (Harry holding his trunk) arrived in the living room of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place to several shouts of, "SURPRISE!" and "Happy Birthday, Harry!"

The Grangers were all grinning at Harry, who was in total shock as he looked around to see Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Neville, Ginny, Arthur, Molly, Fred, George, and Ron all watching him and laughing. The words, 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY' in randomly changing colors were floating above their heads and he noticed a table full of presents was in the room as well. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He'd never had a birthday party before. He decided that the best thing to do was laugh. He certainly didn't want to look like a sissy in front of everybody, nor did he want to ruin the party with tears.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” said Sirius. “I’ve finished fixing everything that was wrong with my motorcycle and renewed the charms on it. After the party I’m going to take you for a ride!”

Harry looked ecstatic and joked, “Thanks for coming everybody. The party’s over,” earning a laugh from those who were nearby.

Molly Weasley, however, did appear nervous. “Are...are you sure that it’s safe, Sirius?”

“Of course it’s safe. It’s charmed so that it’ll never crash and no one can fall off of it. I couldn’t hurt myself or Harry on it if I wanted to.” Sirius then smiled. “It’s also charmed to be invisible, actually completely undetectable, to all muggle police while it’s running, so we don’t have to worry about speed limits.”

Harry and Remus started laughing while Hermione and Molly looked very concerned.

Sirius continued, “We can of course make it invisible to everyone, but that could be a problem dealing with traffic. I’m also gonna start teaching you how to drive it.”

Molly said, “I’m sure that will be quite...fun. For now, I think it’s time we had dinner.” She then directed them into the kitchen where she had a feast of Harry’s favorite foods prepared.

Harry enjoyed having dinner with all of them, chatting about several things. What stuck out to him the most was when they were discussing the way Gryffindor had won the Quidditch cup last year when Hagrid said, “It’s too bad this year we won’...” and then saw that several of the adults were glaring at him, even Dumbledore. “I shouldn’ a said that. I should not ‘ave said that. Isn’t it abou’ time fer the cake?”

“What’s going on this year?” asked Fred.

“That we don’t know about?” said George.

Hagrid’s complexion was completely red, and his face was in his hands. Dumbledore answered, “Alas, it is a secret that shall not be

revealed until the opening feast. I do agree with Hagrid however, that it is time for the cake.”

A huge ‘Harry Potter’ cake with a moving image of him on a Firebolt catching a Snitch with fourteen lit candles on it was carried to the table by Molly as everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday to You.’ When Harry saw the image on the cake he laughed. Molly said, “I couldn’t resist it when I saw it at the bakery. I had to get that frosting spell to put on your cake.”

“Wait a minute,” said Harry, “They sell cakes with me on them now?”

“Yes dear,” said Molly, “They’ve been selling cakes with your picture on them for years. This is the latest one since you won the house cup. They also sell the spells to put the picture on them, which is what this is. I baked the cake myself.”

Harry was annoyed at his image being sold without his consent, but didn’t want to ruin his first birthday party. He smiled, “Thanks Mrs. Weasley. I really do like the picture. And thanks for all the trouble you went through baking the cake. I’m sure it’s wonderful.”

“It’s no trouble, Harry-dear. But isn’t it time you blew out the candles?”

Harry took a deep breath and made his wish. He then blew at the candles as hard as he could, and they all kept burning. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw George put his hand over his mouth, as though to hold back laughter. “Fred, George,” said Harry, “You wouldn’t happen to know why the candles didn’t burn out, would you?”

Molly eyed her twin sons suspiciously as Fred said, “I’m deeply offended that you of all people...”

“Would accuse us of such a crime without any proof,” finished George.

Molly pointed her wand at the candles and said, “Finite Incantatum,” and the candles went out. “Sorry about that dear. It’s probably another one of their so-called products for their joke shop idea...” her tone got more irritated, “that I told them to get rid of.”

Fred turned to Padfoot. "Sirius, wouldn't you agree that people should not be punished..."

"...unless they have a fair trial first," said George.

Sirius laughed. "Normally I'd say yes, but I'm not about to get between you and your mother."

-

The party continued on. After the cake, it was time to open presents. From Sirius, Harry got a helmet, along with an instruction manual for Sirius' motorcycle. He also got a black leather jacket and matching gloves from his godfather.

Remus gave him a photo album full of magical pictures of the Marauders and Lily from their time at Hogwarts. Several of the pictures of the Marauders were cut at one edge. Remus explained, "In the pictures that had...the rat, I had the other people corner him on the photo's edge and cut that small portion out. It made the pictures much better; don't you agree? Sirius and I had great fun burning all those edges."

"Indeed we did," said Sirius with a smile.

Dumbledore gave Harry a pensieve. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gave him a new jumper. Fred and George gave him a box of joke supplies they invented, including something called ton-tongue toffee and some fake wands, earning a glare from their mother. Ron gave Harry a new broom servicing kit.

Ginny gave him a Quidditch t-shirt that showed a Snitch flying around all over the shirt (front, back, sleeves). Every so often, a hand that appeared to come out of the wearer's heart would grab the Snitch and hold it for about thirty seconds, and then release it. While the hand was holding the Snitch, the words 'Heart of a Seeker' appeared below it.

The Granger adults gave Harry a special Wizard's chess set that had the players on broomsticks. Hermione gave him a book on chess strategies, which caused Ron to frown, along with some expensive

cologne. Hagrid gave Harry a book called 'Magical Creatures and Where You Can Find Them' which thankfully didn't bite. Neville gave Harry a plant that he was assured didn't need much maintenance along with a book about the plant and a watering schedule.

Soon the older crowd left, leaving the Weasley kids, Neville, Hermione, Harry, and Sirius (who lived there). They decided to play a game of indoor quidditch where one team had Fred as beater, Ginny and Neville as chasers, and Ron as keeper. The other team had George as beater, Harry and Hermione as chasers, and Sirius as keeper. It turned out that without the obstacle of riding a broom, Hermione was very good as a chaser, although she tended to dribble the Quaffle around the court when she had it like she was playing basketball. Her explanation was that, "My dad for some reason taught me the game of basketball when I was a little girl, and I always enjoyed it." She, along with Harry, got some shots past Ron while the other team got some shots past Sirius. In the end, Harry's team won, but not by much. Neville claimed it was because of him until Ginny told him to stop putting himself down.

Finally, everyone but Sirius, Harry and Hermione, who told him she didn't want to be asleep when he portkeys into her room, left. Hermione started reading a book when Sirius said, "Alright cub. Put on your helmet. We're going for a ride!"

-

Within a few minutes, Harry was riding behind his godfather on the same bike he'd dreamed about more than once. They were going over two-hundred miles per hour, and Harry was enjoying it immensely. The charms on the bike allowed him to feel secure (so he didn't feel like he was about to fall off). He was enjoying the fast turns and other stunts his godfather did. Padfoot even purposely drove past a police car that had two overweight cops that wouldn't be able to outrun a crawling baby if their lives depended on it. They naturally didn't see the bike as they continued munching on their donuts.

Harry didn't realize at all where they were until he recognized Privet Drive. The bike slowed down as they got close to the Dursley residence, and Sirius pressed a button that made them invisible.

Sirius then parked and pulled a bag out of his jacket pocket. He then pulled several dungbombs out of the bag and handed them to Harry. He then grabbed more out of the bag that had obviously been charmed for size and started throwing them all over the Dursley's lawn and house. Finally catching on, Harry laughed as he joined in the fun. Sirius kept on pulling more and more out of the bag until Harry hit Dudley's window and Uncle Vernon walked outside to find the culprit, only to find that he couldn't see anybody around and his precious house smelled like a huge pile of manure. Sirius then had the bike start flying and got right above Vernon's head and dropped one more dungbomb.

Sirius took off at that moment, keeping the bike invisible as they flew home. Both of them were still laughing their heads off when they got back to Sirius' house. Hermione asked them what was so funny and Harry answered while still laughing, "Ha-ha...Dursleys' house...dungbombs...ha-ha."

Hermione didn't have much trouble figuring that out. She did her best to look upset instead of amused. "You went to the Dursleys' house and dropped dungbombs?"

"All over the house and yard," said Sirius proudly grinning.

"One on Uncle Vernon!" said Harry while doubled over in laughter.

Hermione couldn't stop herself anymore. She joined in the laughter. "If anyone deserves that, it's them."

-

Harry spent that night at the Granger residence, and came over at the normal time. This time, however, he brought what little he hadn't already brought. The plans were now for Hermione to come to Grimmauld Place at seven to exercise with Harry, and then to come back to have breakfast with her parents before returning for training. Both Harry and Hermione would return on weekday afternoons for lunch and to ride their bikes to the karate school. Harry's bike would stay at the Grangers' house until they were done with the karate class. After the class, Harry and Hermione would spend the afternoon at the Granger house, and Harry would sometimes have dinner with the

Grangers and then go home. Other times he'd go home and eat dinner with Sirius.

This was the day they would start the last part of magical transportation, apparition. Ginny showed up on time, and Sirius, who had unsplined a few people when he worked for the ministry, was observing them. Harry and Ginny both let out sighs of disappointment when Hermione announced, "This is going to take about twelve weeks to learn." They then took turns reading out loud from the chapter, talking about the concepts of Destination, Determination, and Deliberation.

After over an hour of the kids trying to apparate from one circle in the dueling room to another with nothing happening, Sirius shouted, "Defend yourself!" and started the dueling practice.

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The next day, a Saturday, after training with Remus and Sirius, Harry and Hermione (in disguise) took the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron and walked through the bar to the entrance to Diagon Alley, with Harry carrying his now empty trunk. Hermione led them to a shop called, "Mathias' Magical Luggage."

Harry followed her inside, still holding his trunk. He looked around and saw luggage of all sizes and shapes, and finally saw a list of trunk options over a desk that had a bell on it. Hermione beat him to the desk and rang the bell. After less than ten seconds, an old bald man in dark blue robes walked out and said, "Sorry for the wait. I'm Mathias. May I help you?" with a smile on his face.

"Yes," said Harry. "My name is Larry Evans, and I recently purchased this bottomless, weightless trunk elsewhere, and I was interested in finding out about the options that are available for it."

Mathias enthusiastically replied, "Oh yes, there are several options available for this and any other trunk, depending on your needs. If you need security, we can set it where you're the only person who can open your trunk. If you need to carry it more conveniently, we can set it to shrink to the size of a muggle credit card. If you need it organized, we can set several compartments of whatever size is

needed. We even have one compartment that when you open it, a closet springs out of it like muggle pop-up books. We can even turn your trunk into a fully furnished apartment, with as many rooms as you need."

"Wow!" said Harry. "That's more options than I expected. Let me think about that for a few minutes."

"Take your time sir, take your time. I'll be in the back. Ring the bell when you're ready or if you have any questions. The prices are on the wall." He walked back where he came from.

"So what do you think?" Harry asked Hermione.

After much discussion, Harry decided to get one compartment for books, another for his other school supplies. He got the closet compartment, and another one for clothes you don't hang. He got a one bedroom apartment with a full bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room the size of his training room. The kitchen and bedroom were fully furnished, while the living/training room only had some folding chairs. He also got the option of shrinking it to a credit card, but didn't set it so only he could open it.

After ringing the bell, Harry asked Mathias, "Can the security option allow more than just one person to open my trunk? I end up in the hospital wing at Hogwarts a lot, and I'd like for my girlfriend to be able to open it as well."

"Of course, sir. I'll just need a drop of blood from each of you, when all the other options are set. It'll be ready in about an hour. You may wish to visit other shops while I work."

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They took his advice and walked around Diagon Alley, naturally stopping at the bookstore and getting a few more tomes. While they were looking around, they noticed a stack of the morning's Daily Prophets disappear and get replaced by the afternoon's. Harry and his girlfriend took a look at the headline,

"Crouch sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss"

By Rita Skeeter

Barty Crouch Sr., a formerly high-ranking ministry official who was recently found to have broken his Death Eater son out of Azkaban by switching him with his wife in disguise, letting her die in prison while he held his son, Barty Crouch Jr., under the Imperius Curse, was sentenced to have the Dementor's kiss performed on him this evening. The reasons for this harsh sentence are many. One is that a man in his position should be a paragon of virtue, not deceit. Another is that no one at all said one word in his defense. When asked about this, an anonymous source said that 'No one likes Mr. Crouch.' Another reason is... " The article went on and on, bashing Crouch, and then bashing the ministry for ever letting him work for them.

Harry and Hermione didn't say anything about this to each other. As much as Crouch might have deserved it for what he did, Harry didn't feel comfortable saying so.

They went back to the luggage shop where the trunk was ready and supplied their blood for the security system. Harry paid for it and they left the shop after he shrunk his trunk. The couple kissed and portkeyed to Hermione's house for a swim.

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Chapter 19 – Dreams and Plans

The next afternoon, Harry and Sirius went to see a wizard solicitor, Miranda Flemming. She was an attractive middle-aged African woman wearing gold-colored robes and a black pointed hat. She shook Sirius' hand and then Harry's (he wasn't in disguise except for the blank glasses he was wearing). "Hello Mr. Potter. It is an honor to meet you. You too, Mr. Black. What can I do for you? Mr. Black, were you dissatisfied with your compensation for unjust imprisonment?"

Sirius smiled and shook his head. "No, that's not it. Actually, it's Harry who wants your help."

She gave the raven-haired teenager a scrutinizing look. "What may I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

"Well," he said unsurely, "In the muggle world, if someone uses your likeness without your permission, you can sue them for the money they made doing it. I'm not sure of wizard laws, but I know that many businesses are using my image to make money. For example, a bakery down the street sells cakes with the image of me catching a Snitch and is making a lot of money because of it. I've also seen t-shirts with my face on them, and several other things like that. I'm getting sick of it. I don't care that much about the money, but I'm sick of seeing my picture everywhere I go while people use my fame to get rich."

Miranda sat back in her chair and started thinking. "Well, I know that there are no wizarding laws against that, but you are right that it's not fair." She scratched her chin as she thought. "Without any law to..."

Sirius cut in. "Don't we have the right to privacy?"

"Of course. But what...so you're saying that Harry's privacy is being violated by everybody using his image. Also, with your image on a product, it appears that you're endorsing it, so I suppose that's false advertising." She sighed. "I might be able to get a court to try the case, but without a solid law on the books we'd never win in court."

Harry looked down. "Well, thank you for your time."

“I’m not finished. We could send a very legal-looking letter to these companies requesting that they stop using your image or start sharing profits with you, threatening to publicly condemn their company if they don’t. Harry Potter saying he doesn’t like a particular bakery could have a serious affect on their business.”

Both Harry and Sirius smiled at that idea. Harry said, “Alright. What I’d like to hire you to do is find any product with my image or name on it, and write those companies. I have never given my permission to anyone to use my image.”

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After they negotiated a price for her services, Sirius apparated Harry back to Black Manor, where Sirius told Harry, “I guess now’s as good a time as any to start your motorcycle lessons.”

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Over the next few weeks, Harry spent a few hours learning how to drive the bike, while Hermione made sure he didn’t stop studying ancient runes while Sirius worked out Defense class plans. They’d both completed the homework from their classes, so Harry could concentrate a lot more on it. When Ginny’s birthday came around, they had a surprise party for her. Harry suspected Sirius didn’t need much of an excuse to throw a party.

Four days after Ginny’s birthday, Harry and Hermione earned their purple belts in karate. This meant that they didn’t have to attend the last week of classes, but decided to anyway to help Neville practice, since, just as with the yellow belts, he hadn’t quite been able to pass the test and had to retake it. During that week, Sirius and Harry were notified that Sirius’ petition to become Harry’s guardian had been approved, so they had another party. The next day, Harry got an owl from his solicitor saying that she’d sent an owl to fourteen different companies she’d found using his image.

That was the same day Neville was able to proudly put on his purple belt. After Harry and Hermione congratulated him, they invited him to continue practicing with them once school started, which he gladly accepted. There was one week left in the summer, but they didn’t

know if they would be able to practice or not. They were going to the Quidditch World Cup with the Weasleys. Neville's Gran unfortunately wouldn't let him go, saying she'd let him do that muggle karate, and that should have made him happy enough. Sirius planned to take Harry and Hermione for a weekend at a beach house after the World Cup (provided the game didn't take all week) and bring them both to Kings' Cross Station on Monday, September 1st, to see them off to Hogwarts.

A few days before the cup, Harry was lying in bed, dreaming that Hermione was sitting at a table reading. He walked up to that table and sat down across from her. She marked her place and closed the book, looking into his eyes as she licked her lips. Harry was about to kiss her when suddenly she looked like...Wormtail. He looked around and he was no longer at the library. He asked Wormtail where Nagini was, and continued the conversation until finally Harry pointed his wand at an old muggle caretaker and said, "Avada Kadavra!"

-

Harry's green eyes opened wide as he reached his hand to his scar. It was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had pressed a white-hot wire to his skin. He got up out of bed and started pacing around his room, breathing heavily. He realized he was drenched with sweat, so he opened the door and walked to the bathroom. When he got there, he started out splashing water on his face, but then decided to just take a shower.

When he'd finished, he was leaving the bathroom wearing a towel when he heard Sirius' voice say, "You're taking a shower pretty early, aren't you?"

"Oh, I, well," he said, feeling a bit embarrassed over waking up from a nightmare. "I had a dream about Voldemort and Wormtail, and, well, I woke up with my scar hurting. It's fine now though."

Sirius' eyes widened. "Your scar hurt? Has this ever happened before?"

Harry walked into his bedroom. "Yes, in my first year, when Voldemort was at Hogwarts. If you don't mind, I'd like to put on something besides a towel, and then I'll tell you all about it."

About an hour later, Harry had just finished telling Sirius about his first year, the dream he'd just had, and the prophecy Trelawney had made the day Wormtail escaped.

Sirius sighed. "Well, I guess we'll have to be careful. I think your scar is some sort of connection to Voldemort, so..."

"So you think that what I dreamed might have really happened?" asked Harry.

He nodded. "Yes. I also think we should tell Dumbledore about the dream." He took a deep breath. "If you have any more dreams like this, let me know."

"Ok. But why haven't I always had dreams like this?"

Sirius looked very old. "The only answer I can think of was inside the dream. If that rat is helping him, then he's..."

"Getting stronger," answered Harry, his face pale. "Since we're up, want to practice dueling?"

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Chapter 20 – The World Cup

When Hermione came over for their morning exercises, Harry decided to tell her about his dream. He smiled and blushed as he said, "Last night, I dreamed I was alone in a library with you."

Her ears turned slightly pink. "D-did you?" He nodded. She seductively asked, "What were we doing in the library?"

He smiled. "You were reading at a table and I sat down across from you. You put down your book, carefully marking your place like you always do, and licked your lips."

"Like this," she practically purred, leaning toward him as her tongue moistened her lips.

"Mmm Hmm," he nodded, licking his own lips and leaning toward hers.

"Then what happened," she asked softly.

"Well, I leaned forward like this, and just before our lips met..." He paused for affect, with his lips less than a centimeter from hers. "...You turned into Wormtail." He burst out laughing at the look of surprise and disgust on her face.

She slapped his arm and said, "That's not funny!"

"The look on your face is," he defended. "But seriously, that wonderful dream was interrupted by a Voldemort nightmare that Sirius thinks was a vision that really happened." He then told her about the nightmare and his scar hurting and Sirius' opinion that Voldemort was gaining strength.

Hermione looked scared. "Well, at least you told him about it and you guys wrote Dumbledore about it."

"Yeah, but the worst part is that I lost a dream that promised to be really great," he said pouting. "Believe me, I'd much rather dream about you."

"I'd guess you would rather dream of anybody but Voldemort," she said grinning at him.

"True," he said with a smirk, "but I'd rather dream of you than anybody else."

"Maybe we can try and figure out what would've happened in your dream," she said as she licked her lips again and leaned toward him."

-

The next day after training, Harry and Hermione went to the Burrow with Ginny to spend the night so they could leave early for the Quidditch World Cup. Sirius couldn't go because he was still working on his lesson plans. Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Harry, and Hermione went. (for those who've forgotten, Percy's already left the family)

After they arrived and set up the tents at the World Cup, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron looked around at the souvenirs. Early on in their shopping, Ron spent most of his money on a figurine of Viktor Krum, despite the fact that he was supporting the other team. When they ran across a saleswizard with omnioculars, Harry was gonna buy a pair for all four of them, but Ron said, "No, don't bother."

"All right," said Harry, and then he looked at the saleswizard. "Make it three pairs."

"What?" exclaimed Ron. "Why are you getting Ginny a pair and not me?"

"Because she wants one," said Harry grinning. "You said you didn't. You haven't changed your mind now, have you?"

As they all stared at Ron, his face turned purple as he thought about what he wanted. "All right, get me a pair, but you don't have to get me Christmas or birthday presents for the next five years."

"Ok. Make it four pairs."

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Not long after that, they went to the stands to get to their seats. They weren't pleased to find they were seated near the Malfoys, and Harry found himself wondering if he were good enough at dueling now to take out Lucius. He knew any squib could take out Draco, but he'd never seen Mr. Malfoy duel. He figured he probably couldn't beat Lucius yet, but that by this time next year he'd be able to.

Harry enjoyed the leprechaun display that the Irish gave, but when the Bulgarians sent their Veela out to dance, he was entranced by them for a few moments, until he felt someone grab his hand. He came to himself wondering why he'd been standing, and he looked to see Hermione half upset and half amused at him. "What just happened?" he asked, clearly showing his confusion.

"You, you're fine now?" she asked. "The other boys aren't."

He looked around and saw that she most certainly was right. Ginny was fighting with Ron to stop him from jumping after the Veela. He was going to help until he saw Mr. Weasley grab his youngest son. "Yeah, I'm fine. What happened?"

Hermione looked uneasy. "Those are Veela. They have some sort of magical charm that pretty much possesses males, especially teenage ones, to want to do anything to 'earn their love.' The only people pretty much immune to them are either older – at least forty – or in love." She blushed at that statement.

Harry smiled at her. "So when you touched me, I remembered who charmed me without magic – my true love, and the spell was broken."

She looked down blushing. "Er, yeah. That's...that's what happened."

-

Harry thought the match was completely awesome. He was blown away by the Irish chasers, and very impressed by Viktor Krum. He couldn't believe that the twins were right about Ireland winning but Krum getting the Snitch. They enjoyed celebrating and talking about the match until Ginny started falling asleep.

Harry never knew if he'd actually gone to sleep before Mr. Weasley woke him up. Death Eaters had attacked. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron were sent into the forest where Mr. Weasley thought they would be safe. On the way, Ron tripped on a tree root, and Draco Malfoy's drawling voice came from behind them. "I guess with feet that size, it would be hard not to fall."

Harry, Hermione, and Ginny immediately drew their wands and pointed them at Draco. Ron, seeing that they'd drawn their wands, did the same.

Harry shouted, "Why aren't you wearing a mask out there? Didn't your daddy let you join him?"

"If my father were out there, you'd be the last person I'd tell," answered Malfoy, "but I would advise you to get out of here. I'm sure they could spot a mudblood like her a mile away, if only from the sten...Whaaa!" At that moment, he was hit with a bat bogey hex from Ginny's wand, as leg-locker jinx from Harry's wand, and an eat slugs hex from Ron.

Hermione said, "Now was that really necessary?"

"YES!" said her three companions.

She huffed but then said, "Let's go," so they left Draco like that, lying face-first on the ground with bat bogies attacking him as he belched up slugs. Harry could swear he heard Malfoy crying.

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They soon found themselves in a clearing. They heard footsteps stop near them, and a muffled female voice saying something like, "No master!"

Then they heard a male voice shout, "MORSMORDRE!" and a symbol of a skull with a snake crawling out of its mouth shot into the sky.

Before the sign had even reached the sky, Ginny looked horrified and turned her wand toward the direction of the voice. "Stupefy!" She then

ran into the forest toward the noise of someone falling. Not knowing what else to do, Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, brandishing their wands.

They saw a house elf crying with her arms around what appeared to be nothing. They could see shoes and the bottom of robes that seemed attached to an invisible person. At least he was invisible to Ginny. Harry and Hermione could see him with their contact lenses, but he looked a bit transparent to them. Harry walked forward, pulling the invisibility cloak off of the unconscious man who had dropped a wand next to him. The elf didn't let go soon enough and wound up holding the cloak and shrieked. "NO! Winky can't be getting clothes! Winky is a good elf and is staying with master while he is hiding!"

At that moment, there were several small pops nearby and Harry said, "Duck!" as more beams of light shot past them, hitting Winky, who fell stunned.

"Stop! Those are my kids!" shouted Mr. Weasley, who'd been the first to enter the woods. "And who are these?"

"Ginny stupefied the man just after he'd sent up the Dark Mark," said Hermione. Harry was amazed Hermione knew that symbol. He certainly didn't. "And then you shot the house elf. I believe she said her name is Winky and was calling the man master."

"That's Barty Crouch Jr.!" shouted Amos Diggory. He then turned to Ginny. "If I'm not mistaken, there's a reward for capturing him."

Arthur walked up to his daughter. "I'm very proud of what you did, but how did you know His mark? I've never shown it to you."

Ginny looked down and whispered just so that Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Arthur could hear. "Tom already had made that symbol before he was sixteen."

Before they could say anything about it, several ministry wizards had their wands pointed at Crouch Jr. and were standing close by. "We'll take it from here," an auror said, and then looked at Mr. Weasley. "We'll be in touch with you about your daughter's reward by the end of the week." He then put a portkey on the unconscious Crouch and

they both disappeared. Soon after, the others left as well, after someone recognized the wand as belonging to Crouch Sr. before his arrest, leaving Harry's group alone with a stunned house elf. The ministry hadn't even noticed the invisibility cloak.

Hermione walked cautiously up to the elf and enervated her. The elf immediately began crying. "W-Winky. Is that your name?"

"Yes." She continued to weep, holding on to the cloak

"Are you all right?"

"No, Winky is not all right! Winky is never being all right again! Winky is getting clothes that the last one to hold was master! Winky isn't being bound to master's family anymore! Not only is Winky being disgraced, but Winky's family is being disgraced by the Ministry of Magic!"

Hermione looked down. "What will you do?"

"Winky isn't knowing. Winky will wander around begging for work like Dobby, but Winky is being properly ashamed and isn't asking for wages."

"Dobby?" asked Harry.

"Yes. You is Harry Potter, and is freeing Dobby, but he isn't finding work." She then started crying louder. "No one is hiring disgraced elves!"

Harry got a thought. "My guardian Sirius Black got rid of his old elf because he never worked. I wonder if he'd hire you. Maybe even Dobby. I feel bad about him not finding work."

She brightened up at the prospect. "You is believing that Sirius Black may be wanting to hire Winky?"

"Maybe. Can you come to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place after I get there? If you can find him, ask Dobby to come too."

“Harry,” said Hermione, sounding annoyed. “You are talking about owning slaves.”

He turned to his girlfriend and reached his hand to put on her shoulder. She pulled back. “Hermione, I’m talking about helping someone, actually two someones.”

“Fine,” she said, although it was clear it wasn’t fine, “We should be headed back to the campsite. Am I right, Mr. Weasley?”

“Yes, quite right,” said Arthur. “I’m going to see if we can leave early, so we’ll need whatever sleep we can get.”

“Actually Mr. Weasley,” said Harry, “We, that is Hermione and I, have emergency portkeys that go to our houses. If you don’t mind, could we just get our stuff and take them home. I’d rather get into my bed and sleep without getting woken up. Winky, don’t come to the house until after I wake up.”

Winky said, “Yes, Harry Potter,” timidly.

Arthur looked around to make sure no one was listening. “That sounds brilliant. I wish I had one.”

“Actually,” said Ginny timidly, “I do. If you want, once we catch up with the twins and get our stuff we can take it home.”

Ron and Mr. Weasley were surprised at this announcement, but Arthur simply said, “It wouldn’t be a bad idea if all the kids had them.”

“They saved our lives once,” said Hermione. “Someone, who probably was here tonight, recognized Harry while we were having our first date and tried to kill us, but we escaped with our portkey necklaces.”

“Ingenious.”

-

They walked back to the tents and found the other Weasleys waiting for them. Arthur told the older boys to apparate home and they’d be

there in a minute. Ginny took off her necklace and her remaining family members grabbed it at the same time that Harry and Hermione disappeared.

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Hermione, concerned about Dobby and Winky, elected to come to Grimmauld Place after only five hours of sleep, hoping she wasn't too late. She found Sirius in the living room frowning as he stared at a roll of parchment. He looked up and grinned. "Hello Hermione! You're just the witch I wanted to see!"

She grinned back at him. "Really?"

"Yes. I just finished writing out my lesson plans, and I want to make sure I haven't left anything out. Would you mind looking them over for me?"

Hermione beamed at the prospect. "I'd love to!" as she walked toward him. "By the way, is Harry up yet?"

"No," said Sirius, "He's still sleeping soundly. I was surprised to see you here already."

She decided to warn Sirius about Winky and Dobby, so she told the story to him. "...and so now Winky and probably Dobby are going to show up here in hopes of becoming your slaves. You can't accept them, Sirius!"

He chuckled a bit, which caused her to glare at him. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's just that you don't understand house elves. You yourself admitted how upset Winky was at being freed. If no one takes her on, she'll probably die from depression. Even if they don't actually get wages, they get a roof over their heads, all the food they want, and most importantly a sense of purpose. I know that some wizarding families like the Malfoys mistreat elves, but the trouble is in the treatment, not the ownership of the elves. If we don't hire her, she'll consider this to be the cruelest joke that anyone could possibly pull on her."

Hermione looked sad. "I, I never looked at it that way before."

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About three hours later, Harry walked down the stairs. Before he was halfway down, both Winky and Dobby had appeared with small pops in front of him and were bowing low. Dobby was proudly wearing his one sock and Winky was crying as she still held the invisibility cloak.

"Hello, Winky and Dobby," he said cheerfully. He then noticed Sirius and Hermione waiting for him. "Let's go down the stairs and discuss the situation."

"Hermione told me what happened," said Sirius, "and I would love to take you on Winky, but I'm not sure if I need both you and Dobby."

Winky brightened up immediately. "You-you is wanting Winky?"

"Yes."

Dobby was looking down with his ears drooping. "You, you is needing Dobby to watch over Harry Potter! Dobby was wanting wages but Dobby would be proud to serve Harry Potter without wages."

"You want wages?" asked Hermione with a smile.

"Yes, Dobby is wanting wages from anyone besides the great Harry Potter who is freeing Dobby!"

Sirius looked at Harry. "Maybe you should hire your own elf, Harry. You'll be coming of age in a few years and will eventually want to move away."

"Dobby is wanting very much to be Harry Potter's house elf!" he said eagerly.

Harry looked from Dobby to Sirius to Hermione. "Alright, but I'm paying you. How much would you like to be paid?"

Dobby gleefully jumped for joy. "One knut and one day off per year."

After Harry (with Hermione's help) negotiated it up to a Galleon per week and one day off per month, both Winky and Dobby performed

the spell that bound them to their owners. After that was done, Harry asked, "Winky, why are you keeping that cloak?"

She sadly said, "Because house elves that is receiving clothes is having to keep them until their new owner takes it from them."

Harry turned to Sirius. "Could you take that cloak and give it to Hermione?"

Hermione looked shocked. "No, that won't be..."

Sirius grinned at Harry. "Absolutely!" He then took it from Winky, who was happy to be rid of it, and gave it to Hermione.

Harry said, "Look, if you want you can just use it for emergencies, but I want you to have it. Besides, we're starting to get taller, and eventually my cloak will be too short to cover us both."

-

The next morning, they decided to continue their training for the next few days before their weekend with Sirius. The elves insisted on cooking all the meals and cleaning up after them. Hermione slowly got used to them, as she spent time there improving upon Sirius' lesson plans so much that he offered to make her a teacher's aide. She would grade papers for the first through third year classes and help him adjust lesson plans. He also wanted to start a dueling club, and asked Harry to help him with that – assisting in demonstrations and teaching younger students, as well as helping plan those lessons (although Hermione insisted she be included in the lesson planning as well).

On Friday afternoon after their dueling practice, Sirius side-along apparated first Harry and then Hermione to the beach house he'd stayed in while he was in hiding.

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Chapter 21 – Last Weekend Before School

Harry and Hermione looked around the small comfortable cottage they were inside as Sirius gave them a tour. It had a kitchen, bathroom, living room, "...and here are the two bedrooms."

Obviously Harry and Sirius would be sharing a bedroom, but Harry decided to purposely misunderstand. He smiled deviously. "All right! You get one and me and Hermione get the other one. You are the best godfather ever!"

Hermione blushed and put her head down while the color drained from Sirius' face. "Er, Harry you misunderstood. You see..."

"No I didn't. Hermione and I are sharing one of the rooms." By now Hermione knew that Harry was joking and suppressed her laughter at Padfoot's dilemma.

"Actually cub, sorry to disappoint you but we're sharing a room."

Harry decided to go a step further. He faked anger and yelled, "You are NOT sharing a room with Hermione!" At this point Sirius' face went red until Hermione burst out laughing. Harry couldn't hold back his laughter anymore.

"You're pulling my leg!" said Black as he joined in the laughter.

"Of course I am!" said Harry in between laughs. "How thick do you think I am? I know I'll have to sneak to her room..."

"Harry!" yelled Hermione indignantly.

"Just kidding, luv. I know you'd hex me if I tried."

"Just remember that," she said with a mock scowl.

"If you don't mind Hermione," said Sirius, "Since Harry and I are sharing, you get the smaller bedroom."

“Oh that’s fine, Sirius,” she answered. “It’s about the size of Harry’s bedroom at the Dursleys. If he can live there for months, I can spend two nights there.”

Padfoot grinned. “Now that we’ve got that settled, what do you say we get changed and head to the beach before the sun goes down?”

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They spent a few uneventful hours (unless you count Sirius teasing Harry for looking at Hermione’s swimsuit) at the beach enjoying themselves. Since it was a secluded spot (the whole reason Sirius was hiding there) there was nobody at that beach. When Harry commented on it, Sirius explained, “This is a private island that the Black family owns, and it’s warded so that no one comes here. If anyone gets close to the border they have to turn around.”

Hermione’s face brightened. “Oh! You mean like the ministry did for the world cup! Does this ward work with magical people or just muggles?”

Sirius was glad to see someone interested in his family’s security obsession. “Everybody. This place is much more secure than that. Remember, my family was mostly dark wizards, so they were obsessed with security. They didn’t hide the manor, but they warded it very well so that no intruder can get in there by conventional means – that is the door, floo, or apparition. This place is far more secure than that. There are runes at strategic points in the property that keep out anybody that’s not in my family or invited by me just like the house, but even more. It’s unplotable. The floo system will not work here. There’s something in the runes that stops floopowder from working. The only way a portkey can get through the runes is if there’s blood from a Black family member on it. If someone were to actually get past the border, they’d be blown backwards by incredible winds that would keep blowing them back until they’re half a mile away.”

“You’ve got to show us some of those runes!” said Hermione excitedly.

"Maybe tomorrow," said Sirius, as he magically created a campfire at the beach. "Oh, magic isn't detected here, either. So, Hermione, why don't you conjure up a few chairs and a table while Harry and I get some food to roast out here?"

"Why don't you just summon the food, Sirius?" asked Hermione with a smirk.

"Oh yeah. Accio food," Padfoot said as he pulled out his wand.

Hermione conjured chairs with small surfaces attached to them, similar to the seats in a nice theater. They levitated hot dogs and later marshmallows over the fire and ate smores made with the finest Honeydukes chocolate.

Sirius stared at Harry. "You look so much like your father did at your age."

"So I hear," said Harry with a small grin.

"I remember the first time I met him. I was looking for a seat on the Hogwarts Express. The kids who came from other Slytherin families wanted me to sit with them, but I'd already decided that I wanted something better for myself." He took a deep breath. "I grew up with the same stupid pureblood propaganda as all of them, but for some reason, I knew that it was wrong, but the others didn't. Maybe it was because I wanted to make something of myself, not pretend to be somebody simply because of who my parents were. Maybe because I didn't think it was right to hurt someone who had never done anything to you."

Padfoot sighed and put his head down. "I was ten when my father brought an unconscious muggle into the house and down to the cellar. I asked why he was there and my father said he'd bumped into him on a crowded street. My dad brought him to the house so he could torture the man in a private place where the ministry couldn't detect the spells he used." He looked Harry and then Hermione in the eyes. "The screaming started less than one minute after my dad closed the door to the cellar, and went on for hour after hour." Sirius took a drink of firewhiskey. "When father led him out of the house, the muggle had lost his mind. That's the day I started to hate my father."

“Wow,” said Harry.

Sirius continued. “Anyway, when I got accepted at Hogwarts, I made up my mind that I wouldn’t be like my dad, so I wouldn’t sit near my dad’s friends’ kids. Nobody else wanted to let me sit with them. They knew I was from a Slytherin family. Finally when I got to the back of the train I saw three boys sitting together. James Potter, Remus Lupin, and...” He growled at this name. “Peter Pettigrew. Anyway, your father invited me to sit with them immediately.” He then chuckled. “Peter didn’t want me to sit there once he knew who I was, but James and Remus insisted. That rat was afraid I was a dark wizard.” Harry and Hermione chuckled. “When I was sorted into Gryffindor, they became my best friends. My family hated me from that moment on.”

Sirius told them stories of the Marauders’ exploits as Hermione held Harry’s hand until they were too tired to stay awake. Harry pretended he was going to sleep in Hermione’s room until Sirius pulled his hands behind his back in a manner Harry guessed he’d learned in his auror days and pulled him into the bigger bedroom, which had two beds. It rained that night.

The next day after breakfast, they went outside. Sirius said, “Follow me to the runes,” and turned into a dog and started running.

The two teenagers started following as fast as they could. “It’s a good thing we’ve been exercising,” said Harry, “Or we’d never be able to keep up.”

“I know!”

“I can’t wait to chase him when I’m a lion.”

Hermione giggled at that thought. “A cat chasing a dog.”

“While the dog’s chasing another cat. That is, if you master the transformation by then.”

“You know I’ll be able to transform before you.”

Harry grinned. “Five snogs says I’ll transform before you.”

Hermione laughed as she blushed slightly. "I'll take that bet. If I change first, you snog me. If you change first, I'll snog you."

Harry was blushing now as they continued running. "One of us has to change soon because I want to snog."

"I didn't say we couldn't snog until we're animagi."

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After they'd run about a mile, Padfoot changed back to a human and pointed at what almost looked like a flat headstone from a cemetery, except that it had runic symbols on it.

"Well, Harry, do you know what it says?" asked Hermione with a grin.

"Oh course I do. I know exactly what's written there. Unfortunately, I'm sworn to secrecy."

"Come on Harry," his girlfriend said as she slapped his arm while grinning. "Think. This is what you've been studying for months. Take it one symbol at a time. I know you can do it."

He walked up and looked more closely at the rune. "Well, the first symbol means leave."

To Hermione and Sirius' delight, Harry figured out the entire message of the rune, and they went on to one more before heading back to the beach, and Harry was able to translate that as well. The gist of it was everything Sirius had said, with a few additions. One was that it only rained at night on the island. Another was that if an intruder got five yards into the property line they'd die. Muggle planes and helicopters couldn't fly over it. Even fish couldn't get into their portion of the beach water as though a net were separating them. Birds (with the exception of magical mail-carrying ones) even flew around the property, which Hermione pointed out, "...isn't a very good idea. A bird watcher or muggle radar could notice the phenomenon and wish to investigate."

Sirius laughed. "They already have. You never asked where we're located."

Harry asked, "Where?" while Hermione's eyes went wide.

"It, it's not the, the Berm..."

"The Bermuda Triangle," said Padfoot with a grin.

"What?" said Harry in awe.

"I can't believe it!" said Hermione excitedly. "Some books I've read said they think some sort of ancient ward is around the Bermuda Triangle. They never suspected it was somebody's personal property!"

Harry and Sirius laughed.

"No one will ever look for us here! This is the perfect hideout!" exclaimed Harry.

"Exactly!" said Sirius.

They spent another night very much like the previous one, and spent Sunday playing muggle games like Frisbee (sometimes with Padfoot the dog) along with monkey-in-the-middle and several others until suppertime, when they went back home. Sirius made them both promise not to tell anyone (including Hermione's parents) that it was the Bermuda Triangle.

All too soon it was time for another year at Hogwarts. After saying goodbye to the Grangers; Sirius, Harry, and Hermione all boarded the Hogwarts Express, looking forward to an exciting year.

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Chapter 22 – Hogwarts, Here We Come

As Sirius, Harry, and Hermione made their way through the train, Padfoot got a lot of stares. When he'd notice the students, he smiled broadly and said, "Hi, I'm your new defense professor, Sirius Black. I understand that the Dementors were in here searching for me last year. They were early." It was easy to tell who had and who had not read the news that Black was innocent based off of the reactions. Fortunately, every compartment they passed seemed to have at least one person to explain that to the others. Because of Sirius' presence, very few people noticed Harry and Hermione holding hands.

They finally reached the last compartment in the train, which had Neville, Ron, and Ginny sitting in it. "Hi guys," said Harry as he sat down next to Neville.

"How was your weekend trip?" asked Ginny.

"It was great," said Sirius with a grin, "to spend a weekend at the beach."

"There were runes in the area that we got to study," said Hermione excitedly as she sat next to her boyfriend.

"They basically keep unwanted people away," said Harry before Ron, who was rolling his eyes at Hermione, could comment. "It was a great beach."

"Harry was able to translate all the runes," Hermione continued proudly, evidently unaware that Harry was trying to save her from an argument. However, when Ron responded, he wasn't speaking to Hermione.

"Since when do you translate ancient runes, Harry?"

Harry slightly blushed. "Oh, er, Hermione's been teaching me this summer so I can drop Divination. I'm taking a test after the feast. If I pass it, I can say goodbye to Trelawney."

"Of course you'll pass it, Harry!" insisted Hermione.

“But then who’s death will the old bat predict?” asked Ron. “It better not be mine.”

At that moment the door to their compartment opened, and Sirius, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny had their wands out within a second.

Taking a look around and noticing the professor and the wands, Draco’s expression changed to dread for a split second, and then back to its usual sneer. Crabbe and Goyle paled. “Professor, I believe that it’s against school policy to point a wand at a student like that. When my father...”

“If your filthy Death Eater father wants to do anything about it, he’s welcome to try!” said Sirius with venom in his voice. “I don’t know what Dumbledore’s playing at letting filth like you attend Hogwarts, but rest assured you and that murderer who spawned you don’t scare me!”

Draco’s face turned red as an angry expression filled his face. “Teachers can’t talk to students like that!”

“Snape did it all the time to Harry! Why don’t you and your Death Nibbler buddies find another compartment before I turn you into a ferret.”

Draco sneered, “Professor’s can’t use transf...” At that moment instead of Draco Malfoy, a white ferret was on the floor between Crabbe and Goyle. He then started bouncing up and down as the Gryffindors laughed. Soon the ferret was placed inside Crabbe’s pants and the Slytherins were pushed out of the compartment, which closed immediately.

Hermione looked like she wanted to laugh, but was resisting. “You really shouldn’t have done that to Malfoy. It is against school rules. You could get in trouble.”

“I will not be bullied by Death Eaters or their spawn! If I wouldn’t take that from my family, I certainly won’t take it from filth like that!” Sirius smiled. “Besides, it’s not like I really need the job if I do get in trouble. Anyway, he’ll change back in an hour.”

Harry put on a straight face and decided to change the subject. "Ginny, did you get your reward from the ministry?"

The redhead smiled broadly at that. "Yes. It was 1,000 Galleons! I couldn't believe it! I bought a few things with it, but for the most part saved it."

"That's smart, Ginny."

"Yeah. Truthfully, even though I enjoyed seeing Bill in Egypt last year, I thought it wasn't very smart for us to spend the money we won in that drawing on a vacation," said Ginny.

"Yeah," added Ron, "I'm glad they at least got me a wand, but honestly it's like they forgot that we could use the money. They spent all of it and then bought us second-hand books and clothes. For once, we could've had new stuff for school! I'm just glad Ginny had that prize money. While we were at the cup, mum bought me these ancient horrid dress robes that she expected me to wear. As soon as Ginny got the money, she bought both herself and me some nice ones.

"That was nice of you, Ginny," said Hermione.

"You'd have done the same thing if you'd seen that ghastly outfit mum bought him," she said as she crinkled her nose. "They even smelled bad. I don't think anyone explained to her that dress robes are supposed to look nice. That's the whole point of their existence. Mum doesn't know but we burned that outfit once we got our robes. They were purple with..." The others were all laughing by the time she'd described them.

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The rest of the ride went by uneventfully, and true to Sirius' word, Malfoy was back to normal by the time they got to Hogwarts, although Harry thought his hair was even lighter in color than usual. He certainly was avoiding Sirius Black after that, and consequently didn't get near Harry's friends, who stayed with the new professor on the carriage ride. While everyone got wet from the rain, Ron was more

drenched than the rest of them because Peeves hit him with a water balloon just before they walked into the castle.

When Harry and Hermione walked hand-in-hand into the Great Hall, many people did take notice. When they heard Draco (once Black was on his way to the staff table) mutter something about holding the hand of a filthy mudblood, Harry glared at Draco and said, "Shut it, you filthy Death Eater spawn, unless you want a repeat of what happened on the train! Sirius showed me that spell. Of course, I've never tried it before so I might mess up and make you half a ferret instead."

Draco's eyes widened in fear and he silently turned on his heel and went to the Slytherin table.

"Sirius didn't show you that spell," whispered Hermione as she sat at their table.

Harry smiled at his girlfriend and whispered back. "Draco doesn't know that." She started giggling softly.

"So," said Lavender, who had walked up to them grinning, "I see you're holding hands. Does that mean that you're dating?"

Hermione blushed and nodded as Lavender squealed and said, "I've got to tell Parvati!" and almost ran back to where her best friend was sitting.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "At least now everybody at Hogwarts will know that you're taken. Hopefully that'll stop most blokes from asking you out."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know that nobody ever asked me out before you. I," she looked down. "I know I'm not..."

"If they saw you in that bikini they would!" said Harry with a wicked grin, causing her face and neck to turn crimson.

After a few moments of regaining her composure, Hermione said, "I'm just hoping the girls will leave you alone. Especially since we started exercising, you look really good."

Harry took her hands in his and looked her in the eye. "You're the one who looks good. But even if that weren't true, you have absolutely nothing to worry about even if other girls do like me because of my stupid fame. You're the one want."

She kissed him quickly just before the sorting began. After that Dumbledore allowed them to eat before making his speech. Hermione was surprised to find out from Nearly-Headless Nick that Hogwarts had so many house elves working in the kitchens, but continued eating after Harry asked Nick, "Are they happy here?"

"Yes," the ghost said, "Many of them claim that Hogwarts is the best place to work in all of Britain, except of course when that poltergeist is terrorizing them."

Soon the time came for Dumbledore to make his speech. After welcoming the students and reminding them of the rules, he introduced, "...our two new staff members. Professor Black, who I'm sure most of you know was recently cleared of all the charges that were against him, is the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." There was a round of applause.

He then continued. "As Professor Snape will be busy this year performing other duties, he will no longer be teaching potions, while he does remain the head of Slytherin house." There was tremendous applause from every table but Slytherin. Albus then motioned to a gray-haired woman in tan robes and said, "Professor O'Brian is the new potions teacher." There was mild applause for her. Harry thought she had a kind face as he made himself look at her and not at the murderer she was replacing.

Dumbledore was lucky no one tried to hex him when he announced that there would be no Quidditch this year. However, the news that the Triwizard Tournament was being held instead seemed to alleviate the anger, until he said that only people seventeen years or older would be allowed to submit their names to the impartial judge. Harry however, realized that Hermione must be rubbing off of him as he went over the runic symbols he'd studied that summer and was anxiously awaiting his test. He didn't pay any attention to the details

of the tournament once he knew he couldn't enter even if he wanted to, which he didn't.

Hermione giggled when she heard him whispering the names of runic symbols while Dumbledore was still speaking. "You'll do great, Harry," she whispered, "Don't worry."

"Does hearing that help you if you're taking the test?"

She looked down for a moment. "Er, no."

Eventually the students were dismissed to their dorms, and Harry made it a point to find out the Gryffindor password from a prefect before walking toward the staff table. He felt Hermione kiss his cheek and heard her say, "Good luck."

He soon found himself standing in front of McGonagall. "Hello Professor."

"Hello Potter. May I introduce you to Professor Aruna, our Ancient Runes teacher. She'll be administering the examination." She gestured at the professor.

Harry looked at the red-haired woman in her late twenties, and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Professor Aruna."

As she shook his hand, she glanced at his scar. "I'm pleased to meet you as well, Mr. Potter. If you'll follow me to my classroom, we'll get this test over with so Professor McGonagall can write up your schedule."

As they began walking, Harry said, "Thank you for allowing me to take this test."

"Oh, that's no problem. I understand that Miss Granger has been tutoring you this summer."

"Yes. But if I mess up, it's not her fault," he added quickly.

She smiled and turned toward him. "I noticed you holding her hand. Are you two dating?"

Harry blushed madly. "Er, yes."

"Good. She usually sits by herself in this class, and I'd wondered about her social life. Mind you, she's at the top of the class, but I'd hoped she had some people to have fun with."

"We do our best."

"If you pass the test, I'd imagine she won't be sitting here alone anymore."

Harry was still blushing. "She, er, mentioned that when we were discussing the possibility of my taking the class."

"Very well. Here we are." She opened the door to an empty classroom decorated with pictures of magically historical places that Harry knew were protected by runes and they walked in. He chose a desk near the front and she summoned a parchment, quill, and ink. "This quill has been jinxed against cheating," she said with a mock-stern expression. "You can't copy off of anyone in here."

He chuckled. "Oh man. There goes my evil plot."

She smiled. "You may begin now."

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About fifty minutes later, Harry got up and handed her the parchment. "I'm finished."

"Already?" She smiled. "Either you really know the material or you really don't. Hold on a minute while I grade it." She then summoned the answer key and performed a spell on both it and Harry's test. Both scrolls were then animated as they floated in mid-air next to each other, each revealing specific questions in synchronization as Professor Aruna watched carefully. She'd say, "Next question," every fifteen seconds or so as she smiled more brightly as she went on. Eventually she announced, "You got a perfect score!"

Harry smiled widely himself. "Blame Hermione. She kept drilling me and drilling me until I would dream about this class."

The teacher shook Harry's hand firmly and said, "I'd like to officially welcome you into my class, Mr. Potter."

"Thanks, Professor."

"By the way, Miss Granger is the only other person I know that's gotten a perfect score on this test."

"Really?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "I'd think some of the Ravenclaws would've too."

"Yes really. The last question tricked everyone but you two."

"Why? I thought it was the easiest question on the test."

"Exactly. Everyone else complicated it. They thought it was too obvious of an answer."

"Well, thanks again," said Harry. "It was nice meeting you."

"It was nice meeting you too, Harry. Do you mind if I call you that?"

Harry smiled. "Truthfully, I prefer it."

"Goodnight."

Harry then walked out the doors in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. Before he took five steps away from the door, he saw Professor Dumbledore standing there, but he didn't look normal. He looked almost transparent like a ghost, but he wasn't the color of a ghost. Harry smiled as he realized that Dumbledore must be invisible. He was going to ignore the headmaster until he remembered that he had to speak to him. He walked straight up to Albus and said, "Hello Professor Dumbledore."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at the look on the aged professor's surprised face. He then appeared normal. "I'm curious, Harry. How did you know I was here?"

Harry smiled. "I've had to learn to not allow anyone to sneak up on me," he answered vaguely, "I've actually learned a lot this summer, and was hoping you could help me with a few things."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "Really? What may I help you with?"

"Well, Professor Lupin has been helping me learn occlumency, but feels that I've learned as much as he can teach me. He said that you're a master legilimens, and that you may be able to help me improve."

"Occlumency?" he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "That certainly is a useful skill, especially considering the dreams you've had of late."

"Sirius believes that they were really happening. What do you think?"

"I think you shouldn't dwell on those dreams."

"But what do you think?" insisted Harry. "Sir, I'd really like an answer."

Dumbledore looked a bit sad. "I do think that Professor Black's analysis is correct, and I also believe that it is a good idea to learn occlumency to block them as you're attempting. Although we may be able to gain a small advantage through those dreams, there is a much greater risk of Voldemort manipulating you through them, perhaps sending false visions." Harry's eyes widened at this thought. "Not to mention the unpleasantness you endure during the ordeal. I shall endeavor to teach you that skill. If you've no objection, I'd like to quickly evaluate you now so I can plan our lessons accordingly."

Harry blinked. He didn't really want the old man in his head, but he figured it was either him or eventually Voldemort. "All right." Dumbledore looked Harry in the eyes. After a few seconds, Harry felt a tingling sensation that slowly grew as Harry felt his barriers weaken. He tried reinforcing them, but it was too late. He felt Albus in his thoughts for a split second before he was out.

"Very good, Harry," Albus said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'd say that you're about half way to being a master. I should like to meet with you every Thursday night after dinner."

“Thank you sir. Um, could Hermione join us? She’s at about the same level that I am. Ginny Weasley’s been learning with us as well, but I don’t think it’s as important that she learns. She doesn’t know as many secrets as Hermione.”

“Such as what you’ve been learning this summer?”

“Yeah, but Ginny knows that too. Maybe she should study with us.”

“I don’t think it would be productive to have all of you together for the lessons. I can only read one mind at a time. I shall speak to them both individually. I believe you said that you feel it is more important that Miss Granger master occlumency.” Harry nodded. “May I ask why?”

Harry contemplated for a moment whether to let Dumbledore know they knew the prophecy, but decided not to. “Well sir, she’s my girlfriend now, and, er, I tell her all my secrets. If someone were trying to find information on me, they’d naturally pick her first.”

“I understand, my boy, and would be more than willing to help, but you both should be safe at Hogwarts.” Harry decided not to mention the various perils he’d faced inside the castle walls. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes, er, one of the things we’ve, that is Hermione, Ginny, and I, have been learning, can’t be done here. I was hoping you’d allow us to go to Black Manor for a few hours each Sunday.”

“What is it that you’re learning that cannot be accomplished inside the...apparition?” he narrowed his eyes appraisingly at Harry.

“Well, I don’t believe that I should answer that question,” said Harry with a smirk, causing Dumbledore’s eyes to twinkle.

Albus winked. “Then it’s a good thing I didn’t ask that question. You three may floo to Black Manor for whatever reason it was that has slipped my mind to ask every Sunday after breakfast, but you must return before lunch. Since you won’t have Quidditch practice taking up your time, I don’t expect this or any other training you may be doing to affect your grades. However, should your professors inform

me that your grades are slipping, this privilege, which I insist that you three keep secret, will be taken away. Professor Black is of course welcome to join you, although if I'm not mistaken, Remus will be there to help you as well."

"Thank you sir." Harry decided to add, "After that attack earlier this summer, I want to be as prepared as possible to escape. If I wasn't wearing an emergency portkey then, I'd have died."

"Yes, I heard about that. The Death Eaters do seem to have been active lately." He sighed. "Oh, by the way, how did you do on your test?"

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When Harry arrived and gave the password, he thought he'd find an empty common room. Instead, he saw Hermione sitting near the door reading. She immediately put a bookmark in the huge tome and closed it as she got up. "Well, how'd you do?"

Harry grinned. "I had no problem remembering where Gryffindor Tower is or the password."

"On the test, you brat."

He put his head down. "Let's just say that I didn't perform like a Ravenclaw."

"Er, um, what did you have a problem with?" she said sadly.

"Well, there was this one trick question on the test."

"Oh, I heard that a lot of people missed that. Surely she didn't fail you for one question."

"Everyone but you and now me missed it. I got a perfect score, unlike any Ravenclaw." He then smiled until she punched him arm. "Ouch! Why'd you do that?"

"You deserved it and I'm not sorry! You had me thinking that I didn't teach you properly! That was mean!"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have joked about grades. I know how important they are to you."

"They should be important to you as well," she said pleadingly.

"Well, this one certainly is. I don't have to listen to Trelawney talk about my impending death anymore. I'm really tired. Goodnight Hermione." He then kissed her.

"Goodnight, Harry."

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The next morning at breakfast, while McGonagall was handing out schedules, Lucius Malfoy and Cornelius Fudge (followed by two aurors) walked into the Great Hall and strutted toward the Head Table.

Fudge spoke loudly. "Professor Dumbledore, it has been called to my attention that your new 'professor,' Sirius Black, publicly humiliated Draco Malfoy by transfiguring him and accused his father Lucius of being a Death Eater, which we both know he was proven innocent of years ago. As Minister of Magic, I demand the immediate removal of Black!"

At that moment Sirius took out his wand and pointed it at Lucius' robes. The sleeve was severed and fell off while the aurors pointed their wands at Black, who set his down. Sirius shouted, "Look at his arm, Fudge!"

Looking angry, the minister did as he was directed, and his face turned pale as he said, "The Dark Mark? But you..."

"Avada Kadavra!" shouted Lucius, killing the minister and then turned his wands on the guards, nonverbally stunning them (it was faster than avada kadavra) before they could point their wands at him instead of Sirius. Lucius performed another spell and the room went pitch black.

Harry and Hermione both muttered, "Lens-see at night!" to activate the night vision of their contact lenses.

Harry could see him getting out the door dragging Draco behind him. He pointed his wand at Lucius and shouted, "Reducto!" blasting Lucius hand left hand, which was holding his son, off. At the same time, Hermione summoned his wand, which came out of his hand because of the shock. Lucius then found himself hanging upside-down in midair.

A few seconds later, the light returned to normal, so Harry and Hermione had to quickly close their eyes and deactivate night vision. When they opened them again, Snape was pointing his wand at a now terrified Lucius Malfoy who was still hanging. After Snape felt Dumbledore had gotten close enough, he released Lucius from the levicorpus spell, but he didn't fall. Surprising everyone, he became a bat with a deformed wing and immediately flew out the door and was gone before anyone could catch him.

Draco had watched the whole thing and didn't know what to do. He only knew he was angry. He turned toward Harry. "I heard you send the spell that took off my father's hand, Scarhead! I'll do the same to you when you least expect it!" He then turned to his Head of House. "Snape! How could you! I thought you and he were friends? I'll..."

"Stupefy!" said Snape, effectively stunning Draco. He then turned to the disapproving glare of the Headmaster. "He was getting hysterical and needed to be sedated. I doubted that he'd swallow any potions in his present condition. I suggest taking Mr. Malfoy to the hospital wing."

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Chapter 23 – Adjusting to School

The schedules were hurriedly handed out before everyone was sent to their dormitories. Classes for the day were cancelled as the castle was searched for Lucius, to make sure he wasn't hiding inside the castle. Since he has a son in Slytherin, special care was taken in searching that dormitory before the Slytherins (minus Draco) were allowed inside. Dumbledore however, had to leave for an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot. After they got over the initial shock of what they'd seen, Harry told Hermione and Ginny about his conversation with Dumbledore the previous evening, starting with how his contact lenses let him catch the Headmaster spying on him. Hermione persuaded Harry to spend most of the day studying, although he did play a few games of chess and exploding snap with Ron. He didn't want to risk going into his trunk with other people watching. He could just imagine what Fred and George would do to the trunk or where they'd put it if they found out he was inside it.

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Harry and Hermione got up early the next morning and exercised. They decided to use the living room of Harry's trunk to do their training. They decided to go in the trunk and study their daily lesson an hour after dinner for an hour, followed by an hour of dueling, followed by an hour of karate. They had only one class (Charms) on Wednesday, so they spent most of that day working on homework, as well as most of the weekend.

They let Ginny know their plans so she could continue practicing with them. They also told Neville and he decided to practice dueling and karate with them. They also invited Ron, who reluctantly agreed to do the dueling practice.

Harry made it a point that they had to practice flying every Saturday as well, pointing out that there's no point in being able to charm a broom if you can't properly fly it away. Reluctantly Hermione agreed. Ron and Ginny were easy to convince to go flying with them. Harry knew she'd have to get comfortable enough on a broomstick to be able to do defensive flying to avoid getting cursed if they were escaping from someone. Harry had actually gotten six muggle

brooms to take to school in his trunk so that they could practice charming and uncharming them so that with his Firebolt, he could have enough brooms for one Quidditch team.

Their revised extra study subject schedule was now Sunday-magical travel, Monday-defensive magic, Tuesday-magic potential, Wednesday-wordless-wandless, Thursday-animagi, Friday-advanced charms, Saturday-flying brooms defensively. Occlumency would be studied separately with Dumbledore on whatever days he chose for them (for Harry it was Thursdays after dinner).

They let Sirius know about their plans as well, and he vowed to join in the dueling as often as he could, at least once a week. He also reminded them of the dueling club he was going to start, but knew that Harry's practice was a lot more advanced than the club would be. Whenever they were going to use the trunk, Harry would bring it (shrunk down to the size of a credit card and in his pocket) into Sirius' office (after they made him take a wizard's oath to do no pranks on them regarding the trunk) so no one will find it when they're inside. Hermione was working on learning to make a ward that would protect the trunk from tampering, and was also working on a way to see the outside of the trunk while inside it.

When Harry and Hermione got to breakfast, Dumbledore still wasn't back at the castle. The Daily Prophet that arrived carried a front page article called, 'Fudge Assassinated at Hogwarts: Lucius Malfoy Exposed as Death Eater: by Rita Skeeter.' The article was very uncomplimentary of Fudge, the Ministry, and Dumbledore for letting this happen. It also said that an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot was being held to appoint a new Minister of Magic.

Harry honestly agreed with the reporter that this could have easily been prevented if Fudge had any ability to discern someone's character or the ministry hadn't let Malfoy off all those years ago. He did however think that Lucius' assassination of Fudge was a complete shock to him, so it would've been hard to avoid without having previously arresting Malfoy.

While they were still eating breakfast, McGonagall made an announcement. "I just want you to know that the castle was

thoroughly searched, and Lucius Malfoy was not found.” Draco, who was at the Slytherin table, smirked in Harry’s direction. He didn’t realize it, but several teachers noticed. Because of his threat to Harry the previous day, most of the staff was carefully observing him.

McGonagall continued. “Therefore classes will start today. Professor Hagrid also asked me to mention that all of you who witnessed that atrocity yesterday will probably receive a shock the next time you ride the carriages into Hogsmeade. Most of you probably believe that there is nothing but magic pulling them. That assumption is incorrect. They are being pulled by magical creatures known as Thestrals. They are invisible to you unless you have seen someone die. For more information on them, you may consult either the library or Professor Hagrid. Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Wow,” said Hermione excitedly, “I never dreamed of it! Thestrals! But according to the book I read there are no tame herds. But if they’ve been pulling the carriages for years, Hagrid must have tamed some. I’ll have to ask him how he did it! What?”

Harry was chuckling at his girlfriend. “That is just so...I don’t know...you. You’re so adorable when you get passionate to learn something new. Don’t ever change.” Harry then quickly kissed her.

Ron shook his head and rolled his eyes, wisely deciding not to comment.

“Well,” said Harry, “I believe that we’ve got to get to History of Magic class, and then Hermione and I have Ancient Runes. After lunch we have Potions with O’Brian.”

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After a boring lesson on history taught by Professor Binns, Harry and Hermione happily headed off to the Ancient Runes class. The young couple sat together, earning a wink from the teacher. Professor Aruna started the class by saying, “Hello everybody. Welcome to a new year. First of all, I’d like to welcome Harry Potter, who studied the subject during the summer and passed a test on last year’s material, to the class.”

Some clapped, others glared, and some didn't care. Harry's face turned a bit pink and he waved briefly. The class went on from there, and Harry found it to be much more interesting than divination. He loved the fact that there wasn't any incense burning in the room. The best part was that his death wasn't being predicted. Harry didn't have any difficulties following the material thanks to his studying the previous day. When he told her this, Hermione smiled at him. "You see, studying does help."

-

After lunch, which Harry, Ron, and Hermione ate with Neville and Ginny, the fourth years headed to the dungeons for Potions. Neville commented, "This is the first Potions lesson I've ever looked forward to. It's lucky that Snape's too busy to teach, isn't it?"

Harry's evil smirk (and Hermione's blush) lasted only for a second as he said, "Yeah, lucky," but it was enough for Neville to notice.

"What do you know about it?" When they didn't answer, Neville said, "Come on, I won't tell anyone."

"Do you know what happened with Snape?" Ron asked.

Harry motioned them to a corner in the hallway, and his expression became very serious. He whispered, "I blackmailed Dumbledore. I found out Snape was a Death Eater. He's the reason Voldemort targeted my family. Dumbledore believes he's reformed and so he keeps him in the castle for his protection. I threatened to tell that to the press, along with a description of his 'teaching' method."

"Wow," whispered the two boys. They then continued on to class, which was already filling up with people anxious to find out about this new teacher.

The gray-haired witch was already in class, wearing light purple robes. "Hello everyone. I'd like to call attendance so that I can learn your names." Once that was done, she continued. "Today we'll be making..."

She mentioned the potion and made the instructions appear and then began explaining how the ingredients worked together and the more complex of the instructions until Draco raised his hand with an arrogant look. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

"I know some people," he looked at Harry, "may need extra help, but can the rest of us just do the assignment and have those who don't understand attend your first year class?" Crabbe and Goyle sniggered beside him.

She got a smirk on her face. "Oh, I see. You're an expert potion maker then?"

"Well, I'm one of the best in the class," he bragged.

"Very well. Bring your supplies to the front and demonstrate making the potion."

"What?" he said, his eyes wide.

"Accio potion," said Professor O'Brian, pointing her wand at him. A sealed bottle of a completed potion floated out of Draco's robes as his eyes went wide.

She did the same thing to Crabbe and Goyle, with the same results, catching them all. She looked very sternly at the three of them. "Professor Black informed me of the way my predecessor favored you, and I suspected you might try something like this. I wouldn't be surprised if Professor Snape made the potion himself so that it wouldn't look like he was fabricating your grades. Fifteen points from Slytherin for each of you. After I'm done speaking, each of you individually will come up and make the potion for me. If you can't produce it, I'll be taking another fifty each! I have no tolerance for cheating! And just to be fair..." She pointed her wand and attempted summoning a potion from every student, but no others were found, and so she continued the lesson.

At the end of the lesson, neither Crabbe nor Goyle had been able to make anything remotely like the assignment, so they each lost another fifty points. Malfoy had made an almost good potion, so he only lost fifteen more points. The grand total of Slytherin points lost

was one hundred sixty. They'd only had thirty points so far, so they were at a negative one hundred thirty. Hermione had gained Gryffindor ten points during the lecture for correctly answering a question and another ten for having hers done first and perfectly. Harry got five points for being the second one done with an equally perfect potion. Neville didn't gain any house points, but he managed to make a better potion than Malfoy did without Snape breathing down his neck.

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At dinner, Dumbledore, who appeared worn out, was present. Harry had been hoping for an announcement about the new minister, but none was given. He figured he'd have to wait for tomorrow's newspaper like everybody else.

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Chapter 24 – Happy Birthday, Hermione

The next day at breakfast, Harry and his friends eagerly read the front page story of the Daily Prophet.

“New Minister of Magic Appointed

By Rita Skeeter

Because of the assassination of Minister Fudge, the Wizengamot spent well over a day in discussions over who to appoint as the new Minister of Magic. Four candidates were chosen. The most qualified by far was Delores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Of course, the meddling old headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore vehemently opposed her. However, when it was suggested that he become a candidate, Dumbledore did a great service to our world by declining. He may love to oppose others, but doesn't want to actually do anything besides criticize.

Another candidate was Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Sports and Games. However, too many people, including this reporter, know how he mistakenly fed information to Death Eaters during the war. Anyone that foolish should not be considered for Minister of Magic.

The final candidate, who was appointed by a majority vote of the Wizengamot, is Patricus Vehosia, formerly the Ministry's ambassador to the United States of America. Of course, one wonders what to make of this man who hasn't spent more than a month at a time in Europe for over ten years. His wife is in fact a muggleborn American witch. How are we supposed to look up to someone like that? In this reporter's opinion...”

The article went on and on about how much better Delores Umbridge would have been as minister than Pat Vehosia. Harry sighed. “Have any of you heard of this guy?”

Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Hermione all shook their heads. Hermione said, “But we know that Professor Dumbledore didn't oppose him.”

Ginny said, "I'm glad he stopped that Umbridge woman from taking office. You should have heard dad talking when Percy started working for her. If she were elected, the muggleborns would replace House Elves."

"Then I'm glad she didn't get in," said Neville.

-

From then the days started flying by. Every Sunday they'd practice apparition at Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore taught Occlumency to Ginny on Mondays, Harry on Thursdays, and Hermione on Fridays. Harry and Hermione were staying at the top of their classes, while they helped Ron and Neville. Before they knew it, it was September 19th, Hermione's 15th birthday. Harry had managed to keep his plans completely secret from Hermione.

Since Harry and Hermione were always exercising alone in the morning, he figured that was the perfect time to begin. He was in the common room already when his girlfriend walked down the stairs.

"Happy birthday!" he said when she reached the bottom of the stairs. Before she could respond he pulled her into a quick kiss which she turned into a snog, putting her hands on the back of his head before they could separate.

When the need for air caused her to finally pull away, she smiled at him. "You remembered!" she said excitedly.

"Of course I remembered! What kind of git would forget his girlfriend's birthday?"

"I don't know. I'm just glad you didn't!"

"I figured after our workout I could give you my present."

She kissed him again.

"Sounds great. Let's hurry. I want to open it soon!"

-

An hour later, they were sitting in a corner of the common room with a half hour before breakfast when Harry handed her a present.”

Her smile faltered momentarily as she said, “It feels like a book.” She then gave him a smile that he thought looked fake.

“I hope you like it.”

“Of course I will.”

She tore the wrapping paper off of it and gasped. It was a small leather-bound photo album that had ‘Harry and Hermione’ engraved in gold on the front. She opened it to the first page, and found a few pictures of them together from first year. As she turned the pages, she saw pictures from second year and then third year, even one of them riding Buckbeak. Then there were several from the summer (including a few from their first date – before the attack) and even one from this year. All of them were wizard pictures.

She was smiling as her eyes moistened. “How did you make this? I know we weren’t photographed for all of these.”

Harry grinned at her. “During an Occlumency lesson, I mentioned to Dumbledore that I wished I had more photos of us, and he showed me his pensieve and suggested using it.”

Her eyes went wide. “He has a pensieve?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Anyway, I put some memories in there and brought a camera with me. I got Colin to develop them though. After I told him how I got the photos, he said he wanted to get himself a pensieve so he doesn’t have to carry his camera everywhere and annoy people.” He took a deep breath. “The time we’ve spent together means a lot to me, and I don’t ever want to forget it.”

She kissed him softly. “This is a wonderful, thoughtful gift that I’ll treasure forever, but there’s no way I could forget the time we’ve spent together.”

“I love you, Hermione.” He took a deep breath. “I know people think I’m too young to know what love is, but they’re wrong. There’s a lot of

extra space in that album, and I want to keep filling it for the rest of our lives.”

-

“Earth to Harry and Hermione,” said an amused Ginny a few minutes later when she found the couple in a passionate snog.

They broke apart blushing. “Harry gave me a wonderful gift for my birthday, and I was just thanking him.”

Ginny giggled slightly. “I’m sure he knows you’re grateful by now. Is today your birthday?” Hermione nodded. “Well, happy birthday, then.”

“Thank you.”

-

While they were eating breakfast, Hedwig arrived with a rose in her mouth and a small package tied to her leg. Hermione looked at Harry. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s not all from me,” said Harry smiling.

She took the package first and found a note from her parents. The package was from them but the rose was from Harry. The note also told her to open the package alone, as it was something personal she wouldn’t want her boyfriend (or any other boy) to see.

“Well, thank you for the rose, and thank you for sending Hedwig to my parents.” She then quickly kissed him.

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for that disgusting display of affection,” said a familiar voice behind them, “each. Your father couldn’t restrain himself either, Potter.”

Harry turned and looked coldly at, “Snape!”

“Prof...” said the Gothic Git.

“I challenge that. We’re taking this up with the Headmaster.”

Harry got up and ignored Snape's remarks. Snape followed, and a worried Hermione behind him.

When they reached the headmaster, Harry coldly said, "This person is harassing me, and has just taken a hundred points from Gryffindor because I kissed Hermione at Gryffindor table on her birthday. If you don't resolve this matter, I will shout for all the school to hear..."

"That's quite enough, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly before turning to Snape. "Severus, you are not to give any punishments to Mr. Potter or Miss Granger, and are to make an effort to avoid them. If you happen to see them breaking rules, then inform me and I will personally deal with it."

"But Headmaster..."

"One hundred points to Gryffindor. Severus, we have already spoken on this matter of harassment, but it seems that's not enough. Apparently you need to be informed that he knows the role you played in his parents' deaths, and has threatened to take this information to the Daily Prophet, which would result in the ruination of my career and your incarceration in Azkaban. I suggest you not aggravate Harry."

Snape glared at Harry and then Hermione as his face turned red, but said nothing as he took his seat at the head table. Albus looked at Hermione and smiled. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore turned back to the raven-haired teenager. "Now Harry, you shouldn't do this so publicly. People will realize that something's not right."

"Then keep that murderer away from me. What you did today is acceptable, but if he keeps harassing me, I will carry out my threat, and we both know what will happen. Good day."

Harry then walked back toward Gryffindor tower. He whispered to Hermione, "The nerve of that git! How dare he say anything about my

father? My dad saved his life and in return Snape as good as killed him!”

“I know. Er, I think we should just go.”

“Don’t forget your presents. I’m sorry that son of a...”

“Harry!”

“Fine. I’m sorry he ruined your breakfast.” They started walking in the hallway.

“Just don’t ruin the rest of the day by talking about him.”

He took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just that every time I see that murderer I want to...”

“I know. Let’s just drop it.” Before Harry could protest, she pulled him into a broom closet and proceeded to drive thoughts of Snape completely out of Harry’s mind.

-

They had History of Magic class, followed by Charms. After that, they went to lunch, where Hedwig flew straight to Hermione carrying a small package.

“Harry,” she said after making sure it was from him, “You really shouldn’t have.”

“I wanted to,” he protested as he fed his owl something off his plate.

She unwrapped the gift to find it was a small jewelry box that contained an elegant pair of gold earrings with a small sapphire gem on each. She almost dropped them when saw them. “You...this must have cost...”

“You mean a lot more to me than whatever they cost.”

“I know, but...”

“I love you.”

She smiled. "I love you too, but..."

"That's all that matters. Is it wrong for me to want to give you nice things?"

"No it's not, but you really didn't need to do this."

"I wanted to. Do you like them?"

She grinned from ear to ear. "My birthstone. That was so thoughtful! You do realize that you've earned several snog points, redeemable in the nearest broom closet."

He blushed. "Then I suggest we finish lunch as quickly as possible." He then winked.

-

At dinner Hedwig arrived with a small box of sugar quills for Hermione, which she accepted without protest, knowing that it would do no good. She kissed him and said, "I've got to go to my Occlumency lesson now."

"I'll see you in the common room right after, right?"

"Well, I was thinking about going to the library and..."

He gave her his best puppy-dog eyes. "Please. I think I've still got some snog points left, and I'd rather redeem them on your birthday."

She blushed. "Oh well, fine. Just this one day won't hurt."

"Exactly," he said with a grin.

-

After a productive lesson, Hermione returned to the common room to find it dark and empty. She walked in cautiously with her wand out. "Harry? Anyone?"

"SURPRISE!!!"

She stepped back, almost having a heart attack as the lights came on to reveal almost all of Gryffindor there with a big cake that had fifteen lit candles on it. Harry was standing next to it, along with Ginny, Neville, and Ron.

She looked around the room at everyone until her eyes rested on Harry. "How long have you had this planned?"

"Two weeks."

She smiled at Ginny. "You lied this morning."

"I never said I didn't know it was your birthday," said Ginny, smiling back.

The party was a complete success. Hermione even managed to blow out all the candles (Harry made sure the Weasley twins didn't get near it to prank the candles not to go out). When she finally opened the gifts, she found that Harry gave her an Advanced Arithmancy book.

"I knew you'd give me a book for my birthday," she said, giggling as she teased Harry.

Ron, who hadn't noticed the things she'd received while he was stuffing his face at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, said, "Even I know that you don't give a book on your girlfriend's birthday, even if it is Hermione."

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Chapter 25 – The Contest Begins

Time seemed to fly after that. In between classes and extra training, the days seemed to flow one into the next for Harry, although he made sure that he and his girlfriend took out time for snog breaks. Professor O'Brian was checking everyone for cheating at the beginning of every Potions class. She only caught Malfoy trying it one more time, but knew that he'd try again given the chance. Harry and Hermione kept at the top of their classes, earning many points from their teachers, especially Sirius Black.

The class after Hermione's birthday, Sirius chose an interesting topic to discuss. "Can anybody in class tell me why certain curses are called unforgivable?" Hermione's hand was up immediately. "Yes, Miss Granger."

"Because they are unforgivable. The use of any one of them will earn you a life sentence in Azkaban."

"That is correct. Five points to Gryffindor. Can anybody in the class name one?" Harry, along with a handful of others, raised his hand. Sirius grinned. "Mr. Potter?"

He took a deep breath. "The Avada Kadavra curse."

"Correct. Five points. The killing curse. There is no shield that can block it. The only known way to survive is to make sure it doesn't hit you. Although Mr. Potter here is the exception. He's the only person known to have survived it, and no one really knows how. Mind you, there are lots of theories about it, but none that I want to test. Does anybody else know a curse." He looked at the hands that had been raised. "Malfoy?"

He sneered. "The Imperius Curse, sir," he said proudly yet coldly.

"Yes. That's a curse that controls you. A strong enough mind can learn to fight it off, but it's difficult. Many witches and wizards, including Lucius Malfoy, claimed to do Voldemort's..." Most of the class shuddered at the name. "...bidding under its influence. Of course we now know he was lying. One point to Slytherin for providing such a fine example of a fake Imperius Curse. I wonder

who else was lying about it back then,” he said as he shot a quick glare at both Crabbe and Goyle, who gulped. “Anyone else know a curse?” He looked around and his smile faded. “Mr. Longbottom,” he said kindly.

Neville was trembling, but forcing himself to speak. “The C-cruciatu curse.”

“That’s correct, Neville. Five points to Gryffindor. The torture curse.” He took a deep breath. “This is the most painful curse in existence. Believe me, you don’t want to be hit with this curse.” He glanced in Neville’s direction for a moment, which caused him to pale. “Anyone brave enough to stand up to this evil curse long enough risks losing their sanity. It takes a truly sick individual to do that to someone.” He then looked around the room. “What is it about these three curses that makes them so bad that you automatically get life in prison for performing them? There are other ways to kill and hurt people. Other curses to use. Why are these special?”

Harry thought back to what he’d read in the textbook and raised his hand along with a few others, including Hermione.

“Yes, Harry?”

“Because these curses require a very strong hatred to work properly. You have to really want to torture, kill, or control a person to use them. The ministry feels that if you are capable of using those particular curses, there is probably no hope of rehabilitation for you. Most curses only require the proper wand movement and incantation, and no emotion. But trying those curses without pure hatred inside you will result in the spell not working properly.”

“Correct. Twenty points to Gryffindor.”

He went on with the lesson, and about fifteen minutes before class was over, he assigned an essay and then said, “Starting the first week of October, every Wednesday after dinner I’ll be hosting a dueling club.” This got the class’ attention. After he gave them the details, including the fact that Harry would be assisting him, he dismissed the class.

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Five minutes after they'd been dismissed, Harry and Hermione were headed toward the Great Hall for dinner when they heard Draco's voice behind them scream, "*Densaugeo!*"

Harry instinctively turned and ducked, pulling his wand out as Hermione, a moment slower than Harry, did the same. Unfortunately, she had been hit by the jet of light as she turned, and she was clutching her mouth with her left hand, a panicked expression in her eyes as she pointed her wand, held tightly in her right hand, at Malfoy. Harry noticed Crabbe and Goyle were pointing their wands at him, too, but wasn't that worried about them.

Harry saw the look of fear in Hermione's eyes and lost his temper. He'd been holding back some of his power in class when performing spells, so that he wouldn't show the results of his Magic Potential training (which was nearly finished). Now he wasn't holding back as he shot Malfoy with a silent '*Furnunculus!*' It was a simple spell to cause a few boils, but amplified by Harry's magic, it sent Malfoy into the wall as his whole body broke out in painful boils. He turned his attention to Draco's bodyguards in time to see them both fall petrified to the ground.

Draco was soon on the floor crying and scratching his boils that were everywhere. He'd dropped his wand because it hurt too much to hold it. Harry turned to Hermione, who had her hand over her mouth, but he could see what had to be her teeth sticking out under her hand and growing.

"What happened?" said Sirius, who just approached the scene, obviously on the way to dinner himself.

"Draco and his goons attacked us from behind. He got Hermione with something, and I'm gonna walk her to the hospital wing. Don't ask me to help with those clowns."

"Go on, Harry. I'll levitate them upside down behind you in a few minutes."

Harry put his hand around his girlfriend's shoulder. "You don't really need to cover your mouth, Love. It's not helping."

"Ivvv Trvvin..." she said, her speech impaired by her huge teeth that now reached her knees.

"Don't bother trying to talk, Hermione. We'll hurry up to see Madam Pomfrey and she'll sort this out. I'm sorry he..."

"Vazzen vvvur vvvault!" she tried to say as they hurried down the hall. She could barely hold her head up with how much her teeth weighed.

Harry saw a small group pointing at her, giggling. He glared at them and aimed his wand until she grabbed his arm to stop him, slowly shaking her head.

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The teeth were almost to the floor when they reached their destination, and Pomfrey easily cancelled the curse and started shrinking Hermione's teeth. Harry kept quiet while his girlfriend had her teeth shrunk smaller than before. When the process was over, he had to admit, "Your smile is even more beautiful than ever," causing her to blush.

At that moment, a clearly terrified Draco floated into the room, held upside down with Sirius behind him pointing his wand and smiling. Draco appeared to be attempting to scream, but had obviously been silenced. The normally perfect hair was a complete mess, hanging toward the ground, and he was still covered in boils. Sirius said, "It was easy to revive the other two, but I don't know what to do about him."

"What happened to him?" asked Pomfrey as she put him in a bed.

"I told you he attacked Hermione," said Harry with a grin.

"Yes, yes. I know. Retaliation for the purpose of making my life more difficult. I meant what spell did you perform."

"Furnunculus!"

She stared at Harry. "How many times?"

"Just once," he said, giving her a strange look.

"Are you sure?"

At this point, Sirius stunned Draco and performed a privacy charm on the room. "Don't tell anyone this, but Harry has been working on increasing his magical potential. I think that when he saw his girlfriend hit with a spell, he got angry and released more power than he intended." He turned to Harry. "Am I right?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, but I'm not gonna apologize. The bloody coward attacked us from behind"

"Of course not," said Sirius, "Malfoy's the one in trouble. I took one hundred points and gave him two weeks of detention with Filch. I'm also going to inform the Headmaster and recommend expulsion."

"I doubt Dumbledore would do it. It's more likely he'll make him a prefect next year. Snape pretty much killed my parents, so Dumbledore hired him. Draco will probably be given his 'second chance' for the hundredth time!"

"Probably, but I won't let him or his stooges in my dueling club."

-

Word about the 'duel' soon spread around the school, mainly because it took two days before Draco was released from the hospital wing, and another five before the boils were all gone. Harry's prediction was right. Draco received no further punishment, unless you count enduring a heartfelt speech from Albus about the difference between right and wrong as punishment.

The dueling club started, and Sirius and Harry demonstrated dueling techniques, as well as a few spells, and let the students, which turned out to be almost two-thirds of the school, practice. They used the Great Hall for the meetings. The first lesson was on the disarming spell and dodging. They split everyone up into groups of two where one would cast the spell while the other dodged. Those that had been

practicing with Harry and Hermione did well. The others had varied results that Professor Black and his assistant busily helped correct. Sirius also suggested that everybody start exercising daily, which produced a lot of groans. They were happy that he said, "That's up to you. It's not a requirement of the club."

-

A week later, Neville and Ginny were walking hand-in-hand to Gryffindor tower after a meeting, when Ginny stopped. "I just remembered, I need to go to the library to work on an essay."

"Do you want me to..."

"No, I'll be fine, Neville. Thanks." She quickly kissed him and took off in the direction of the school's vast library. Unbeknownst to them, Ginny was being watched.

She hurried down the hall and took a secret passage through a deserted corridor when it happened. Draco Malfoy, with Crabbe and Goyle on either side of him, walked up to her from around a corner. He was looking her up and down like a piece of meat.

"Well, hello Weaslette. I must say that you have been growing up nicely, despite your family. It must be the fact of your pure blood asserting itself."

"Sounds like your stupidity is still asserting itself!" she said with a scowl on her face as she reached for her wand.

With an arrogant sneer, Malfoy said, "I could make things a lot better for you. Even for your pathetic family." He continued looking her up and down as he walked closer, making Ginny want to puke.

"Last I heard, you were betrothed to Pansy Parkinson. I doubt she'd appreciate you making offers like that."

Draco's ears turned pink, but he showed no other reaction. "I didn't say I would marry you. Your family doesn't have the right status for that. You could be a...distraction though. I could definitely make it worth your while."

Ginny's face turned red with fury as she raised her wand. "YOU..."

Before she could hex Draco, Crabbe (who'd pulled out his wand during the conversation) had sent a weak, badly aimed spell at her. She went into full dueling mode, dodging that spell and sending bat-bogey-hexes at Crabbe and Goyle before Draco could even pull out his wand.

His bodyguards gone, he nervously pointed his wand at her. Pretending he wasn't nervous, he said, "You do have spirit, red. But I..." At that moment he attempted to surprise her with a hex. She dodged that and sent a disarming spell at him, which he was too slow to dodge.

Draco was on the floor when Ginny caught his wand. Then using the wand she'd just caught, she sent a bat-bogey hex at Malfoy. She laughed as he ran off, swatting madly at his disgusting attackers. She went to the nearest girls' bathroom and left Draco's wand on the floor next to a toilet, making it appear that the last person to use it had simply forgotten their wand. She knew that every wand was registered with the ministry, so he wouldn't be able to deny that it was his. She giggled as she imagined Draco trying to explain how his wand had gotten there. She knew he wouldn't dare tell the truth of what happened.

A few days later, she found out Professor McGonagall had assigned him a week-long detention with Filch for reasons he wouldn't tell anybody.

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During the week of Halloween, Harry, Ginny, and Hermione finished their apparition lessons and the magical potential book (although they'd keep doing the magical potential exercises). They were still barely able to change a fingernail in their animagus training. Harry was told by Dumbledore that he was now a master Occlumens, and that Hermione and Ginny would also be within a few weeks. Harry suggested they study Legilimency to replace one of the topics they'd mastered, and Hermione suggested studying magical and muggle survival under any conditions. The goal was that if they were dropped off anywhere in the world (or captured and escaped) with or without a

wand, they'd be able to survive. They ordered the appropriate books, deciding to start with muggle survival techniques.

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It was now the day before Halloween, and the representatives of the competing school's had arrived. Harry and Hermione had been amused by Ron's reaction to Viktor Krum's presence. Harry suggested that he join the fan girls in line to get his autograph.

"That's a great idea," said Hermione, "I'll even loan you my lipstick."

"Not funny," said a disgruntled Ron.

"Yes it was," argued Ginny.

"I'd have to agree with my girlfriend on that point," said Neville, who was sitting next to her. "It was quite humorous."

At that point, the meal began. Both Ron and Neville (much to Ginny's annoyance) were affected by the French girl who asked for one of their French dishes. "She's part-Veela!" they both declared at the same time.

Throughout the meal, Harry noticed the headmaster of Durmstrang glaring at him every few minutes. Whenever Harry would look in his direction, however, he'd turn his head.

Finally, Dumbledore unveiled the Goblet of Fire. "As of this moment, the Triwizard Tournament has begun."

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Chapter 26 – The Fourth Champion

The next twenty-four hours, although exciting to many others, were boring to Harry. While almost everybody else was talking about who would enter the tournament, Harry was complaining to his girlfriend about the fact that normally twenty-eight kids from Hogwarts participate in Quidditch while only one will get to participate in the stupid tournament. Hermione consoled him by snogging him senseless.

He and Hermione had witnessed Fred and George's pathetically dim-witted attempt at putting their names in the Goblet of Fire the next morning, which resulted in them growing huge white beards to rival Dumbledore. They also watched everyone from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons enter their name, while several seventh years from Hogwarts did the same.

Ron was sitting with Harry and Hermione during the Halloween Feast when he said with a stupid grin on his face, "Imagine winning that tournament. All the glory you'd get, along with the fame, money, and of course female admirers. Wouldn't it be great?"

Harry looked at Ron like he'd sprouted an extra arm. "Maybe for you, but I wouldn't want to die for a plastic trophy, even if I could enter. Secondly, I'm already too famous, have plenty of money, and I've got the only female admirer that matters." He put his arm around Hermione as he said the last part of his statement." She responded by blushing and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Ron shook his head. "Suit yourself, mate."

Before Harry could respond, Dumbledore interrupted them by making an announcement. "Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision. I estimate that it requires one more minute."

He instructed the champions where to go when their names were called, and the goblet's blue flames turned red. A piece of parchment was thrown from the fire, which the headmaster caught. He read, "The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum."

“No surprises there!” said Ron as the applause began. Krum walked to the champions’ waiting area.

The Goblet of Fire released another name, and Albus announced, “The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour.”

Ron and Neville (who was sitting near them with Ginny), along with several guys from all over the Great Hall, started whistling as she got up and walked, effectively covering up the disappointment among the other French students. Hermione was pleased that Harry wasn’t among Fleur’s admirers.

Upon catching yet another piece of parchment, Dumbledore announced, “And the champion for Hogwarts is...Cedric Diggory!”

When the Hogwarts champion had left the room, Albus began talking about showing support for your champion until the goblet’s fire turned red yet again. When another parchment was ejected, Dumbledore reflexively caught it. When he read it, his face paled. “Harry Potter.”

Both Hagrid and Sirius muttered, “Impossible!” from the head table.

“No,” whispered Harry as every eye turned on him. He saw some looks of admiration, but mostly contempt.

He turned to Hermione, who gave him a look of sympathy as she said, “Go on.”

“Harry Potter!” was this time shouted by the headmaster.

He stood up and made up his mind what to do. “No, sir,” he said loudly.

“What do you mean, No?” asked Albus.

“I did not enter this tournament, and I refuse to participate! I don’t know who put my name in the goblet, but they are no friend of mine!”

“But the Goblet of Fire is a legally binding contract!” shouted Ludo Bagman, who appeared excited about Harry competing.

“THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE!” shouted Harry from where he stood. “That would mean that anybody could enter anyone’s name in the tournament and they’d be stuck! Professor Dumbledore, you said not to enter your name lightly! How can people do that when anybody with parchment and ink can enter anybody’s name they want? How could that be a binding contract? At least in the muggle world, you have to sign your contracts!”

“But it’s the rules of the tournament...” continued Ludo, who appeared disappointed.

“I refuse to participate, and you can’t make me!”

At this moment Sirius stood up. “As Harry’s guardian, I concur that he cannot participate! He is underage.”

Hermione stood up next to Harry and shouted, “Surely there’s a magical way to prove that Harry didn’t sign that parchment! People die in this tournament!”

A small smile formed on Albus’ face as his eyes began twinkling again. “Of course. Come up here Harry and I’ll perform the test.”

As Harry started to walk away from the Gryffindor table, Hermione grabbed his hand. He looked at her, and she smiled at him. “You’re not alone,” she whispered, as together they walked up toward their headmaster. The other headmasters, as well as the ministry representatives and Sirius Black, joined them as Dumbledore performed a spell on both of Harry’s hands, and then the parchment, which glowed red for five seconds.

“Harry Potter did not sign this form,” Dumbledore announced happily, “and therefore will not be participating.” His face then turned grim as he looked around the hall. “However, whoever entered Mr. Potter’s name is required to participate. When something like this happens, either the individual named or the one who wrote the name must participate. Otherwise when the first task ends, the one who wrote the name will die from breaching the magically binding contract.” There was a hush around the hall as everyone looked at each other horrified. No one noticed the culprit’s eyes bulge out as sweat began to pour down their face. “Whoever you are, I implore you for your own

sake to come forward,” the aged headmaster pleaded as he looked around the hall once again. He sighed. “Very well, should you change your mind, speak to either myself or any teacher here. You’re all dismissed. Those of you from Hufflepuff should know that Mr. Diggory will be joining you shortly. I’m sure that you will wish to arrange a celebration.”

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When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Gryffindor Common Room, it was to several disapproving glares.

“Why on earth didn’t you want to join the tournament?” said Seamus.

Lavender said, “Don’t you want to represent Gryffindor?”

Ron glared at him more angrily than the rest. “You get handed what everybody else wants and you just refuse it like it was worthless!”

“HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE FORCED INTO A LIFE-THREATENING COMPETITION AGAINST YOUR WILL?” Harry was looking at Ron, but his question was to everyone.

“I guess you’re not as brave as we thought,” said Colin Creevey as everyone left them.

“Good night Hermione,” said Harry as he marched toward the boys’ staircase, anger very apparent on his face. He didn’t notice Neville and Ginny walking toward him to say that they understood.

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As Harry lay in bed, mad at the world, he glared at the ceiling until he drifted off to sleep. He didn’t remember to clear his mind for occlumency.

He dreamed that he’d agreed to participate, and almost the whole school was against him anyway. He saw Draco wearing a patch that said ‘Support Cedric Diggory, the Real Hogwarts Champion.’ Draco was touching the patch before Harry found himself somewhere else entirely.

“WHAT!?” he screamed as he looked at a dark face in a two-way mirror. The person he was speaking to was obviously outside on the starless night, so Harry couldn’t identify his face. “How can Potter refuse?”

“M-Master,” said the cowardly man in the mirror, who sounded on the verge of tears, “Dumbledore said that I’ll die if I don’t participate.”

“Then bring Potter to me before then! Your bungling has forced me to change my plans, and for that you deserve to die! If you succeed, then I’ll consider helping you! Here’s what you’ve got to do...”

At this moment, the Occlumency training that Harry had practiced kicked in and he woke up without a scar headache, after only spending two minutes connected to Riddle. He was somewhat pleased that he’d been able to break the connection painlessly without having cleared his mind, but he was also upset that he didn’t hear Tom’s plan. He sighed and cleared his mind, and went to sleep about a half-hour later.

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The next day, Harry found out that he was now known throughout most of the school as a coward. Hermione, Neville, and Ginny insisted that it was ridiculous, listing actual heroic things he had done for the past three years.

Hermione said, “The only thing is that you only do that sort of thing when someone’s life is at stake, not to entertain the school.”

He took a deep breath. “I guess so. I suppose it’s better to be called a coward than the heir of Slytherin anyway.

-

It didn’t take long for him to find out the origin of that rumor, as Draco proudly displayed his badge that said, ‘Support Cedric Diggory – A Real Champion!’ while they were waiting outside the door to take Double-Potions a few weeks later. When Draco touched it, the words changed to ‘Potter’s scared!’

“Oh that’s really witty!” snapped Hermione just before Professor O’Brian walked up to them.

She took one look at Malfoy’s badge and summoned it off his robe, leaving a hole in the material. “Fifty points from Slytherin for wearing this piece of garbage!”

She then noticed others wearing the badges and summoned them all, taking ten points from everyone who had them, leaving five Slytherins and three Gryffindors with gaping holes in their robes. Harry and Hermione were saddened to see Ron among them.

After she’d done her usual search for cheaters, Professor O’Brian said, “Today we’ll be making antidotes, and Mr. Malfoy has volunteered to test his for the class. We’ll be poisoning him in an hour.”

“No you won’t!” he shouted. “My father will...”

“My point exactly! Malfoy, you don’t want to be volunteered to do something dangerous any more than Mr. Potter! However, you have to hide behind your father! You don’t have the guts to refuse on your own like Mr. Potter did! If you’d been entered into the tournament you’d have gone along with it, and then begged your father to get you out of it the next day instead of standing up for yourself!”

“Then I don’t have to take the poison?” said Draco.

“No, you do have to take it. Hopefully you’ll make an acceptable antidote before then.”

At that moment, the door opened and Colin Creevey came saying, “Harry Potter’s presence is requested for a Triwizard Tournament photo shoot.”

“What? Why?” asked Harry.

“The reporter Rita Skeeter wants to interview the champion who refused to participate.”

“No thank you,” said Harry firmly. He whispered to Hermione, “I want to see Draco poisoned,” causing a slight giggle.

“You heard Mr. Potter. She can write a story about the people who wanted to be school champions.”

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Draco’s antidote didn’t work at all, but as he was turning green, Hermione kindly let him take her antidote so he could avoid a trip to the hospital wing. While they were leaving class, Harry said, “You shouldn’t have given him your cure.”

“I thought it would annoy him more to owe a favor to a mudblood.” They both laughed as Draco, who’d overheard him, stormed off without a word.

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The next morning the Daily Prophet carried a fictional interview by Rita that basically said that Harry, while crying on her shoulder, admitted to being too scared to face the challenges of the tournament, and left the impression that Hogwarts didn’t have a champion because of this. As Harry watched people laughing at him, he performed the ‘Sonus’ charm on himself and stood up in the middle of breakfast.

“Excuse me. I’ve got something to say. Everyone who had Potions with me yesterday knows that I refused to give that Skeeter woman an interview, so anything she said about me is rubbish. Not to mention that she seems to have forgotten that Cedric Diggory is our school champion! Obviously this so-called reporter doesn’t care what the facts are. Therefore my question is, WHY ARE YOU EVEN READING HER TRASH?” He then sat down and removed the charm from his throat.

Dumbledore stood up and said, “Mr. Potter is quite right. He did not give Ms. Skeeter an interview, so any claims she has made regarding him are false. On the other hand, I personally introduced her to Mr. Diggory, yet she did not mention him at all in her article. I wonder if she suffers memory problems, or is simply a liar.” Everybody laughed.

This actually seemed to get through to several of the students (none of the Slytherins) who stopped whispering about him. Aside from the fact that Ron still wasn't talking to him, everything was back to normal.

Harry and Hermione were walking toward Hagrid's hut that Saturday when they heard a male voice shout, "Stupefy!"

They both ducked down, avoiding being hit by the red beam. Harry turned and saw Karkaroff running toward them with what appeared to be a blanket. As Harry was reaching for his wand Igor threw it on top of him. Hermione reached for the blanket as Karkaroff shouted, "Activate," and both teenagers felt the familiar tugging behind their navels as they disappeared.

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Chapter 27 – Voldemort's Return

Harry and Hermione landed roughly after that unexpected trip by portkey. Harry was still under the blanket when he heard the voice that filled his nightmares hiss, "Kill the spare."

Knowing instinctively who the 'spare' must be, he blindly pushed Hermione away just as Wormtail shouted, "Avada Kadavra!"

Harry threw off the blanket and got up, quickly glancing to see that Hermione was still alive. He got his wand, pointed it at Pettigrew, who was carrying something hideous that was about the size of a baby, and shouted, "Stupefy!"

Peter managed to move out of the way and dropped the 'infant' into a large cauldron while Harry quickly looked around to see he was in a graveyard.

"Expelliarmus!" came the sound of Hermione's voice from behind Harry.

Pettigrew smiled as he said, "Protego! Crucio!"

Soon Harry was listening in horror as his girlfriend was screaming in agony. In rage he shouted, "Expelliarmus," causing Pettigrew to not only drop his wand, but throwing him against a headstone that had 'Tom Riddle' engraved on it.

As Harry rushed toward Pettigrew in anger, the pathetic man grabbed a bone that was lying nearby and threw it at the cauldron. He smiled as it landed inside it, just before Harry punched him in the face.

Wormtail quickly said, "Bone of the father, unknowingly taken," before turning into a rat and running toward the cauldron.

Harry shot a few spells at the terrified rat, but just hit the tail, separating it from the still running rat. Harry then shot a 'Reducto' curse at the cauldron, only for the blast to bounce off an invisible shield that was apparently protecting it. Harry had to jump out of the way to avoid getting hit.

This gave Pettigrew the time to transform back. He appeared to be in pain, and had some trouble standing, but grabbed the tail off the ground and placed it in the cauldron saying, "Flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed," before he transformed back into a rat and ran toward Hermione.

Harry then followed the rat to see that Hermione was just sitting up. The right side of her face was bleeding as though she'd hit her head at some point, and she seemed groggy. Before Harry got to her, Wormtail transformed and picked her up, holding the dazed girl in front of him like a shield. His right hand was around her throat. Harry glared at his parents' betrayer with more contempt than ever before.

"Drop your wand, Harry," said Wormtail as he slowly moved closer to the cauldron, obviously in pain.

"Don...don't do it, Harry," she managed to say.

Harry slowly began to lower his wand as the rat got next to the cauldron. "You should do nicely, my pretty mudblood," Pettigrew hissed in Hermione's ear as he collected some of the blood that had flowed onto her face with his left hand and then flicked it into the cauldron saying, "Blood of the enemy, unwilling given. You will resurrect your foe."

"What?" said Hermione as she came to herself enough to elbow him in the stomach.

When he momentarily lost his grip on her she dove down, having faith in Harry to point his wand at the rat, shouting, "Stupefy!" Peter flew backward ten feet unconscious. Harry ran toward Hermione, helping her up, and then they both went back to Peter's unconscious form.

Harry picked him up quickly, as Hermione said, "We need to get back to the portkey, NOW!"

As they ran to the blanket, Voldemort's new body, which included a tail and a rat-like muzzle (with no hair anywhere on the body) appeared next to the cauldron. They grabbed the blanket as Voldemort turned toward them. Hermione shouted, "Activate!" and the blanket, along with Harry, Hermione, and Peter, disappeared.

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They reappeared on Hogwarts grounds, and Hermione said, "Let's get to Hagrid's hut. It's the closest place," as together they got up from the ground. Harry was still dragging Pettigrew along.

As Hagrid's home came into view, Harry dropped Peter, put both hands over his scar, and fell to his knees. In his exhaustion, he hadn't thought to reinforce his Occlumency shields.

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He angrily put on the robe that had been carelessly dropped on the ground during the fight, wondering how two young teenagers had overpowered Pettigrew, and yet the ceremony was still completed. He realized that he was wrong to trust that rat with such an important task. At that moment a bat flew quickly toward him, landed, and transformed into Lucius Malfoy and dropped to his knees. For a moment, he stared at his master's face in horror, but then reported.

"Master, I got here as quickly as I could after watching Karkaroff transport Potter and the mudblood! I flew out of Hogwarts' wards as quickly as my wings would take me. Then I apparated to the edge of your own wards. I then flew here as fast as I could. Although I could not see in my bat form, from what I heard from the other side of the cemetery, I believe the rat used the mudblood's blood instead of Potter's in the ceremony. I hope I am mistaken, my lord. I..."

"Crucio!"

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"Harry!" said Hermione, bringing him out of his trance. He shook his head and brought back his shields. He'd honestly been too interested in what was going on to try breaking the connection. He looked around to see he was in Hagrid's bed, with both the half-giant and Professor Dumbledore standing next to Hermione, looking at him in concern. He noticed Pettigrew was not in the room.

Hermione was crying and holding his hand. "I'm so sorry I couldn't..."

"It wasn't your fault, Hermione," he said quickly.

"Mr. Potter is quite correct, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "It was neither of your faults. It was mine for allowing Professor Karkaroff on Hogwarts grounds. He never regretted his crimes as a Death Eater, but merely betrayed some of his friends to reduce his sentence. He should never have been freed from Azkaban no matter what names he provided the ministry with. Now he has helped bring back Voldemort."

Harry looked from Albus to Hermione, who nodded and said, "I told him briefly what happened."

"Yes, but I would appreciate detailed testimony from the both of you once Minister Vehosia arrives. I sent word for him to come right after I had Fawkes deliver Pettigrew into a holding cell at the ministry. My message included a suggestion to force Peter to take a potion that will make it impossible to ever become a rat again."

Harry grinned. "It might be better to just let Peter go. I doubt very much that he'll survive ten steps out of the ministry building."

"I'd imagine Voldemort is quite angry with him for not following instructions," agreed Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eyes. "From what Miss Granger said, Voldemort not only has a few rat-like features because of Wormtail's use of a transformed body-part, but he also has a muggleborn girl's blood instead of Mr. Potter's, which undoubtedly was his plan."

It was at this moment that Harry realized that Hermione was wearing a small bandage on her head. "She should get to the hospital wing," said Harry.

"I quite agree that you both should see Madam Pomfrey."

"I don't need..." protested Harry.

"Just let her check you out. If you're right then it won't take very long, will it?" said Hermione.

"Fine."

-

After the four of them walked to the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey healed Hermione's head, saying that she had a mild concussion and should spend the night there. She agreed that Harry was just fine. They were still there when Minister Vehosia arrived with two aurors.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore," he said amiably, reaching out and shaking his hand. "Thank you for capturing Peter Pettigrew for us. Is that what you wished to speak to me about?"

"Actually Minister, it was Harry Potter and Hermione Granger who captured Pettigrew," he said as he indicated the teenagers. "I believe you will find their story most interesting."

"Mr. Potter," the politician said with a smile as he rushed to shake his hand enthusiastically, "it is a pleasure to meet you! I'll bet you got some satisfaction in capturing the man who betrayed your parents to You-Know-Who."

"His name is Tom Riddle, and he calls himself Voldemort," said the raven-haired youth impatiently, "and he's back!"

"WHAT?!" asked the wide-eyed minister with a look of fear.

"It might be better if he and Miss Granger start their story from the beginning," suggested Dumbledore.

When Vehosia nodded and sat down, Hermione began. "You see Minister, Harry and I were walking to Hagrid's hut when someone shot a 'Stupefy' spell at us..."

A half-hour later, after he'd heard the full story from both of them, the Minister got up and began pacing. Dumbledore said, "You may wish to administer veritaserum to Mr. Pettigrew to obtain his perspective of those events."

"I, I will. It's just, y'know, hard to believe after all these years. I don't want to scare everybody and cause a panic, but I can't ignore this either. Dumbledore, do you have any suggestions?"

With a twinkle in his eyes, Albus said, "I'd suggest that we put Voldemort at ease by pretending that we don't know he's back. He'll be wondering why he isn't hearing anything in the news. In the meantime, you can quietly build up the auror division among other things. I'd also suggest preparing to replace the Dementors of Azkaban for when they defect to Voldemort's side. Perhaps secretly stationing aurors or unspeakables near the prison to respond to any attempt at breaking prisoners out."

"Perhaps the ministry can offer classes in defense for the general public, saying that it's because Lucius Malfoy is on the loose," said Hermione.

"Excellent suggestion, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, "Ten points to Gryffindor."

"Make sure to teach the Patronus Charm at those classes," said Harry, "So that people can defend themselves against Dementors."

The minister smiled. "I think I'll do that. I believe the people would like those programs, and the Minister who started them."

"I also suggest you send envoys to the giants, in hopes that they won't join Voldemort."

He shook his head. "No. I don't believe the giants would listen. One of my first assignments as an ambassador was to try to make peace with the giants. I'd given two expensive gifts to their leader and thought I was making progress only for him to be killed by a more aggressive giant." He wiped his forehead with his hand. "I was lucky to get out of there alive, and I won't be sending any of my people into that kind of situation for nothing."

"That is of course, your decision," replied Dumbledore.

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A few minutes later, the Minister left and Dumbledore had McGonagall, Snape and Hagrid meet him in his office. Once all three were there, the aged Headmaster said, "Voldemort's back, and so we're reforming the Order of the Phoenix. Minerva, call back all the

old friends for a meeting. Severus, you know what to do.” Snape nodded grimly. “Hagrid, I have a very special assignment for you.”

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Chapter 28 – The Wrong Side of the Fence

While Dumbledore was talking to Snape and Hagrid, Sirius walked into the hospital wing, looking ready to kill.

“Sirius,” said Harry, “I was wondering where you were.”

“Sorry cub. While you were still having your vision, I left Hagrid’s hut to try and find Karkaroff. I couldn’t find him.”

“I’ll bet that traitor is half-way to Bulgaria by now!”

“I don’t think so, Harry,” said Hermione, looking deep in thought. “I think we can assume that he put your name in the goblet, and therefore will die when the first task is over.”

“So?”

“So, there’s only one reason why he would have sent us to Voldemort. Remember your previous vision! He’s been promised help against that curse.”

“I doubt Voldemort’s gonna help him now,” said Sirius, “even if he somehow can.”

“Not unless he manages to deliver...”

“My head on a platter.”

“Well, yes,” she said, taking her boyfriend’s hand, “But we won’t let that happen. Will we Sirius, I mean, Professor Black?”

“Of course not,” he said, patting Harry on his back. “I hope Karkaroff does show up! I can give him what’s coming to him.” A dark look crossed Sirius’ face. “It’ll be better than the Dementors.”

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A week passed by with no trouble at the school. The Daily Prophet reported that defense classes would be offered to the general public for ten Sickles per lesson from the famed retired auror, Alaster Moody. After seeing his picture in the paper, Harry wondered how many

people would actually attend classes taught by someone who looked like that. Then again, with Voldemort back, he supposed most people would take all the help they could get. It also reported the murders of some muggle families by Death Eaters, but no one attacked Harry.

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Harry was surprised to find a new teacher in Care of Magical Creatures class. A woman named Professor Grubbly-Plank was handling the lesson that day. The professor said she didn't know where Hagrid was or when he'd be back when Harry asked. She led the class to a tree on the edge of the forest where a unicorn was tethered.

"Oh they're beautiful," several of the girls proclaimed. Then the substitute teacher had the girls pet it while the boys stayed back.

-

After an enjoyable trip to Hogsmeade (wherein Harry bought his girlfriend a dozen roses) visit that Saturday, Harry and Hermione took a walk around the lake, holding hands and enjoying each other's company when Harry noticed some movement near the edge of the forest.

"Someone's over there!" said Harry, stepping in that direction, "sneaking around the forest. Could it be Karkaroff?"

"I don't think so," she answered, "judging by the size I'd say it might be Hagrid."

"Let's take a closer look."

"We can't, Harry! It might be dangerous."

"You're right, Hermione. Go back into the castle. I'll be there in a little while."

"I meant both of us!"

“Shh!” Harry said, continuing in that direction. “That’s not how Hagrid dresses. I think it’s Madam Maxime. I wonder what she’s up to.”

“It probably has something to do with that stupid tournament.”

“Maybe she’s cheating.”

Harry kept walking, so Hermione sighed and proclaimed, “I wish we at least had your cloak.”

As they walked the perimeter of the forest, staying a good distance from the Beauxbatons headmistress, they heard roars in the distance. Hermione grasped Harry’s hand even tighter than she already was. She approached a fence with several wizards on the other side eating lunch about twenty meters from giant cages holding three dragons. Harry and Hermione stood back for a moment watching them until they saw a big rock shoot out of the forest and straight into Maxime’s head from behind. She fell down, unconscious.

Hermione ran to help her while Harry pointed his wand in the direction the rock had come from. “Petrificus Totalus,” he heard Karkaroff’s voice shout as his girlfriend froze in place, falling face-first to the ground.

“Serves you right mudblood!” said another voice Harry was familiar with. Both Karkaroff and Lucius Malfoy stepped out of the forest. “Mr. Potter. What a nice surprise. We were just discussing how to lure you here, and you delivered yourself.”

Before Harry could do anything, Lucius had performed some sort of levitation charm on him wherein he was hanging upside down and was moving over the fence while Igor was picking Hermione up and positioning her stiff body against the fence. “Now you can watch helplessly as your pathetic boyfriend is cooked and eaten by the dragons!”

Lucius let Harry fall in front of the cage that contained a Hungarian Horntail, and then cast a ward around the dragon tamers, so they couldn’t help anyone. Karkaroff magically opened the cages one by one. The beasts were still chained to the cages so they couldn’t fly away, but the chains were about thirty feet long. “Now we must take

our leave of you. Too bad we don't have the time to watch you die slowly. Good day." Both Lucius and Igor took hold of a portkey and vanished.

Harry was momentarily too scared to move as he looked into the eyes of a dragon, but his instincts took over as it prepared to breathe fire on him. He rolled out of the way just in time only to find another dragon, the Swedish Short-Snout, looking at him. He was hit from behind by something that felt like a tree. As he was flying about twenty feet, he realized that it must have been the horntail's tail. Fortunately, he wasn't hit with the end of that tail, or he'd be dead. As it was, he believed a few of his ribs were broken. He was miraculously still holding his wand.

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Hermione watched helplessly, frozen in a position to watch this horrific scene. She realized that she didn't even have the ability to cry while in the full body-bind. Harry had landed in front of the Chinese Fireball, which was preparing to make a fireball out of him. Harry moved out of the way, but not before his robes caught fire. He pulled them off quickly, burning both his hands in the process. He was relieved that his wand didn't catch fire. He shot a silent 'Stupefy' at the beast, only for the beam to bounce off the skin toward the sky. In desperation, he fired a silent 'Reducto' at the monster's face. It hit the snout, moving the head back slightly, angering it.

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Charlie Weasley watched in horror as the boy his mum counted as another son was hit by the Chinese Fireball's tail back toward the Hungarian Horntail that had hit him only a minute before. He knew Harry had to have several broken ribs by now. He was actually surprised that the boy-who-lived was still alive. He was impressed that his spell had gotten any reaction from the Fireball. He thought that Harry would be a very powerful wizard; that is if he somehow survived this. He rejoined his colleagues shooting spells at the ward holding them.

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Harry was laying on his back watching helplessly as the Horntail prepared once again to roast him. He saw the monster's open mouth and had a flashback to his long-ago fight with a basilisk. This time, instead of a sword, he had a wand. Concentrating all the power he had, Harry shot a 'Reducto' straight into its mouth. The beast screeched in pain as it flew backwards, head first, into the Swedish Short Snout, landing on top of it. As the Fireball was running toward him, Harry, panting heavily, turned his wand on his own chest. "Wingardium Leviosa." He quickly rose up straight in the air.

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The bushy-haired girl watched in amazement as her boyfriend flew straight up in the air, beyond the Chinese Fireball's range, but wondered how he'd land. She suddenly heard movement behind her and feared that her attackers had returned.

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"Finite Incantatum!" said Madam Maxime from behind the Hogwarts girl. She'd just awoken with a terrible headache, and saw the brunette stuck, leaning against the fence.

"You've got to help Harry!" Hermione yelled as tears finally started falling down her cheeks. She pointed at him in the sky. "Thank you, by the way."

"You're welcome, child." The half-giant looked at the spec in the air. "Eef ve lower him to the ground, zee dragons vill get him. He vill need a broomstick?"

Maxime pointed her wand in the direction of her carriage while Hermione watched her boyfriend. At the same time that a broom arrived from the forest, the dragon-handlers broke through Malfoy's ward and started shooting at the Fireball and Short Snout. The Horntail hadn't moved since it was thrown off the Short Snout.

"I am too large to fit two people on a broomstick. You vill ave to fly it to him."

Hermione stiffened a bit and swallowed. Harry was at least fifty feet in the air. "I can do this," she whispered to herself. She took what she could identify as a Nimbus 2001 from Maxime and mounted it.

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Harry was tiring quickly as he kept his wand pointed at himself. He was also feeling light-headed. He probably would have passed out already if he hadn't been in such pain. He thought his whole ribcage was broken, and wondered how long he'd be in the hospital wing this time when he got down. "If I get down," he corrected himself. From where he was, he saw the broom flying through the forest and smiled to himself until he saw his girlfriend mount it. She'd gotten practice flying in the summer, but not at that skill level. He knew she was a genius, and good in a fight, but he didn't actually have that much confidence in her ability to fly to his height and pull him onto the broom without losing balance, and fly him down. He also knew he wouldn't be able to help her with his injuries.

-

She took off into the sky easily enough, and pointed straight toward Harry. She wasn't worried about the simple flying. It was getting him onto the broom. When she got next to him, she nervously said, "Hi."

"Er, hi."

"Need a lift?" she said with a worried smile. She slowly maneuvered the broom right below him and moved up until it was in a position he could grab it.

He did with one hand and landed behind her, screaming in agony as he felt his broken ribs. The broom was tilting upwards and he could tell she was fighting to rebalance the broom. She was also crying. "I'm sorry! I'm just not very good at this. I'm..."

"Shh. Just relax and fly above the forest into the school."

"But it's against..."

“Hermione. I know I’ve got at least a couple broken ribs, and who knows what else wrong with me. I need to get to Madam Pomfrey fast.” He was panting as he said that. He managed to stick his wand in a pocket so he could put his arms around her for better balance.

She soon descended in front of the castle and pulled out her wand, performing a spell to open the door. She knew from ‘Hogwarts, A History’ that when the castle is locked, that spell won’t work. She flew into the hallway and around a corner, passing Filch, who started running and yelling at her. She didn’t stop until they were in the Hospital Wing.

“Miss Granger! Mr. Potter. What is the meaning...” At that moment, Pomfrey noticed the look on Harry’s face and some of his injuries. “Let me levitate him onto a bed.”

“Be careful. He thinks he has broken ribs.”

After the school Healer had safely gotten her patient onto a bed (where he promptly passed out) and was examining him, Mr. Filch ran into the room. “I’ve caught you now, Granger, Potter! You’ll be...”

“Mr. Filch! If you’d open your eyes and look at anything but the filthy floors, you’d have seen that Mr. Potter is grievously injured! Miss Granger brought him to me using the quickest means available to her. She should be rewarded, not punished! If necessary, I shall take this matter up with the headmaster himself. Now, leave my Hospital Wing!”

She said all of that without stopping her examination. Filch stormed out of the room grumbling about how unfair it was. Hermione said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, what happened this time?”

“He was attacked by dragons.”

Her eyes bulged out as both Maxime and Charlie rushed into the room. “How is he?” asked the redhead.

“I’ve just healed five broken ribs and am now treating the burns on his hands. What happened? I know he wasn’t in the tournament.”

The three witnesses explained it together as the Healer listened in silence. That is until Charlie said, “...and he killed the Horntail!”

“What?” asked Pomfrey, sure that she was hearing wrong.

“He shot a powerful ‘reducto’ into the dragon’s mouth and killed it! I couldn’t believe it! They’re rushing a replacement dragon over right away so they can still have the tournament.”

“Can’t dragon leather be used for armor?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, along with jackets, boots, and several other things.”

“And dragon blood has twelve uses as well,” she added.

“That’s right,” said Charlie with a smile.

“Then can’t Harry have the Horntail’s remains?”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I mean, he was attacked by a dragon you dragon-keepers were supposed to be guarding. It’s the least you could do.”

“I, I...”

“I’d think your employer would be honored to give it to the famous Harry Potter. I’d hate for the press to find out he refused the request.”

“I’ll have to talk to him.”

“There’s no need,” came a voice from behind Charlie. He looked around to see his boss. “Harry Potter certainly can have the remains with our apologies.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We just ask that you keep the information that the school champions will face dragons a secret until Tuesday evening.”

“But Madam Maxime knows,” Hermione said, indicating the half-giant who was listening. “She’ll tell Fleur Delacour.”

“I will not!” she said as she lay in bed with her head injury, planning to break her promise as a terrified-looking Sirius Black rushed into the room.

“What’s happened to Harry now?”

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Chapter 29 – The First Task

The next few days went by quickly. After thanking Hermione for claiming the dragon remains for him, Harry hired a professional to harvest everything from his horntail that was possible. The dragon-leather was being used to make protective outfits for Harry, Hermione, and Sirius. There would be enough for seven more outfits, but Harry was going to think about who would get them. He was also considering making several vests instead that he could loan out if the castle was attacked or something.

The outfits consisted of a vest with attachable sleeves and gloves, shorts with attachable legs and socks, a hood that attached to the vest, and a pair of boots. The owners would always wear as much of the armor as was practical for the situation.

Hermione was thrilled to find out how much of the dragon's remains could be used in potion ingredients. About half the blood was salvageable. After everything was harvested she stored them in Harry's special trunk.

As soon as Harry was released from the hospital wing, he used his map to find Cedric Diggory to warn him about the first task. He found Cedric in the hall talking to Cho Chang.

"Hi Cedric, Hi Cho," said Harry as he approached them.

"Hi Harry," responded Cedric while Cho blushed.

"Cedric, could I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure." They walked into a nearby classroom and Harry closed the door. "What's up?"

"Dragons," Potter looked at him intently. "The first task is dragons. I've seen them myself. So has Madam Maxime."

Diggory's face paled. "I heard your girlfriend flew you into the castle on a broom and you left a small trail of blood behind you. Was it from them?"

Harry nodded. "I was stupid and ran into Lucius Malfoy and Igor Karkaroff. They managed to capture me and threw me in with three dragons." He took a deep breath. "I barely got out of there alive." At that moment he realized something. "I should have portkeyed away! Dammit! I was so scared I should've...never mind. The point is that you'll be facing a dragon."

"Does Krum know?"

"Not yet. I was going to tell him..."

"I'll do it. We don't know him. He might be loyal to Karkaroff. He might attack you if you're alone together." Cedric grinned. "Of course, you've already escaped dragons, so a Quidditch Player should be easy."

"Ha, ha. Thanks Cedric." They left the room and went their separate ways – Cedric to Cho and Harry to Hermione.

-

When Harry found Hermione, he told her about his realization that he should have used his emergency portkey when he was with the dragons.

"You were panicking," she said. "Not only that, but you couldn't stand still for a moment to think. What if you'd accidentally taken a dragon with you to Sirius' house? Or worse yet my house? And I'm glad you didn't try apparition either, because it was still within school grounds. Even if it wasn't, you'd have probably splinched yourself in your hurry and your...your parts left there would've been..."

"Eaten." He shrugged. "What about when I was in the air?" he said, determined to berate himself.

"You were in need of medical attention. You couldn't have apparated in that condition even if you weren't still inside the wards, and you'd have probably passed out and died if you'd portkeyed then. I know I would've if I'd seen you just disappear. I'd have been sure Voldemort caught you."

“Voldemort! We should’ve left as soon as we were brought to that cemetery.”

“We were separated immediately, and neither one of us was willing to abandon the other. I certainly couldn’t have portkeyed away when Wormtail was holding me. Besides, I’ll bet Voldemort had wards in place to stop you from apparating or portkeying away. That blanket was probably made to pass through his ward. The book said that there are several ways to create wards to prevent most portkeys from working, and it’s impossible to make one that goes through every ward. You have to know what is being used to stop the portkey to make it so it gets through the barrier.

“For example, according to *‘Hogwarts, a History,’* this castle is warded so that only a portkey made by the headmaster can get through the wards. That only applies inside the actual walls of the building. No one, not even the headmaster, can apparate anywhere in the castle or the grounds, with one exception. Because this is a school, the headmaster can set Great Hall to allow apparition within but not outside the room for one hour at a time. That way, apparition can be taught within the castle. Unfortunately that would have been too public of a place for us to learn.”

He chuckled. “I guess so. I’m just glad Dumbledore let us floo to Grimmauld Place every Sunday for our lessons.”

“Me too.”

-

Before they knew it, Harry was sitting with Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Ginny in the stands to watch the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Harry made sure they were far enough away from the action that dragon fire wouldn’t reach them. He gazed at the fenced enclosure as a very familiar looking Swedish Short-Snout was led inside to guard several eggs, one of which was golden. Soon Ludo Bagman’s voice began echoing throughout the arena.

“Welcome everybody, to the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. As you’ve probably guessed by now, the first task our champions have to face is a dragon! Specifically, they have to retrieve the golden

egg from one. First up, Hogwarts' own champion, Cedric Diggory, will be facing a Swedish Short-Snout." At that moment, a whistle blew, and the relatively tiny figure of Cedric came into view.

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Far away, Karkaroff was in a room with Voldemort and Malfoy when he began to feel pain worse than the cruciatus curse. He fell to the ground as he was writhing. "M-m-my L-l-lord," he called out shakily, "Y-y-you m-m-must h-h-help m-m-me."

A content look came across Voldemort's rat-shaped face. "Mr. Karkaroff, you have failed me again and again, and have given me no reason to help you. However, I do have a reason to refrain from helping you. I've never seen someone die from a breach of contract before." He calmly looked at Malfoy. "Lucius, doesn't it appear to be quite painful?"

Lucius chuckled at the broken man who was currently losing his lunch as his body shook violently from the pain. "Yes, my Lord, quite so. Igor, would you say that this is more painful or less painful than the cruciatus?"

-

"Doesn't Diggory look pale," commented Ron.

"You'd be pale too if you had to face a dragon!" said Hermione sharply, remembering the ordeal Harry had just recently endured.

"Sorry mate," said Ron. "I still can't believe you took out a Horntail!"

"I was lucky," Harry shrugged.

"That and all the training you've been doing since summer," said Ginny.

"Quiet," said Neville. "I want to pay attention to the tournament."

They all started using their omnioculars and focused on Cedric as he carefully made his way toward the monster he was facing. His wand

was steadily held in his right hand as he scanned the area, clearly looking for something. They watched him smile and speed up his pace.

Suddenly the beast noticed him and shot fire at him. He saw the flames just in time and dove forward, barely avoiding them as his face hit the ground.

“Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow,” commented Bagman as the crowd screamed and then gasped.

The champion quickly got to his feet and pointed his wand at a nearby rock.

“What’s he doing?” asked Harry.

Suddenly the rock started growing and changing shape into a dog.

“He’s transfigured it into a Labrador!” said Hermione excitedly, “That’s very advanced!”

“Cool,” Harry commented as the dragon began moving toward the barking dog. Cedric began to inch his way toward the eggs.

“He’s taking risks, this one!” commented Bagman’s amplified voice.

When the dragon was half-way to the dog, it stopped and turned back toward the eggs it was guarding. As soon as it saw Cedric approaching them, it blew more flames at him. He pointed his wand at the flames and shot a spell that stopped most of them. However, some of them got to his robes, which lit in flames.

“*Clever* move – pity it didn’t work!” said Bagman as many of the women, including Hermione and Ginny, screamed.

Within seconds, Cedric stopped, dropped, and rolled toward the eggs, putting out the flames. He grabbed the golden one and broke out in a run toward the medical station, narrowly missing getting burned again. Harry, along with most of the crowd, was on his feet clapping and cheering. In total he had taken fifteen minutes.

“Very good indeed!” Bagman was shouting. “And now the marks from the judges!”

Madam Maxime raised her wand in the air first. What looked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

Next was Mr. Crouch’s replacement (the man who’d fired Percy in chapter 17), Tim Novak. He smiled broadly as he gave Cedric a nine.

After that, Dumbledore and Bagman both gave Cedric an eight. Finally, Karkaroff’s replacement, a man named Ludwig Narkoma, gave Diggory a seven, making the final score forty.

The dragon handlers got the Short-Snout out of there and brought in a Welsh Green, and replaced the golden egg.

“That must be the new dragon that replaced the horntail,” commented Hermione.

“It looks a whole lot safer than the horntail,” said Harry. “Fleur should thank me.”

“One down, two to go!” Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. “Miss Delacour, if you please!”

Ron, along with half the boys there, stood up to watch the Beauxbatons champion slowly make her way toward the center of the arena. She pointed her wand at the Welsh Green dragon, whose eyes seemed to start closing for a moment until it shook its head and shot a flame at her. She barely jumped away in time.

“Oh I’m not sure that was wise!” said Bagman.

“Still think it’s not dangerous?” asked Hermione.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t dangerous, just that it was less dangerous than a horntail.”

“I’d have to agree with that,” said Ron.

In the meantime, the French girl was running around the area and turning to shoot another charm at the dragon every fifteen seconds or so. Each time, its eyes would be closed for longer. Finally, the monster collapsed to the ground, apparently asleep.

“Oh...nearly! Careful now,” said Bagman.

With a smirk in her face, and confidence in her stride, she walked over toward the eggs, ignoring the sleeping dragon until it snored a huge blast of fire that caught her skirt.

She screamed, along with half the crowd. Harry could see the terrified young woman calming herself down. She pointed her wand at her skirt, and water sprayed the fire out, making her look like she'd wet herself. Oblivious to this effect, she sighed in relief.

“Good lord, I thought she'd had it then!” yelled Bagman.

She quickly grabbed the golden egg and ran out of there as the crowd began to cheer. In total she took ten minutes.

“We'll now get her marks from judges,” announced Ludo.

Maxime gave her a nine. Novak gave her an eight. Dumbledore gave her a seven. Bagman gave her a ten. Narkoma gave her a six. Her total score was forty. The Welsh Green was led out and the Chinese Fireball was led in. Another golden egg was placed out there.

The whistle blew once more. “And finally, here comes Mr. Krum!” cried Bagman, and Krum slouched into the arena.

He confidently pointed his wand at the beast and shot a curse directly into its eyes. The monster screamed in pain, shooting fire in the wrong direction.

“Very daring!” shouted Bagman happily.

Victor rushed as fast as he could toward the eggs as the injured and disoriented dragon moved around clumsily. When he was almost there, he shot the dragon's eyes again to make sure it couldn't see him, and the beast went wild, shooting fire (which missed Krum)

again as it stomped toward the eggs, eventually stomping on many of them. Despite this, Viktor lunged toward the pile of eggs to grab his prize.

Ludo Bagman shouted, "That's some nerve he's showing – and – yes, he's got the egg!" The crowd was on its feet cheering. Krum had been the fastest and most daring by far, in Harry's opinion. As Viktor left the arena, Bagman continued, "And now the judges' marks."

Maxime gave him a seven. Novak gave him an eight. Dumbledore gave him a nine. Bagman gave him a seven. Narkoma gave him a nine. His total score was forty.

"It's incredible!" shouted Bagman. "All three champions are tied! I guess we'll have to wait until the second task to see who's the greater champion! This concludes the first task of the Triwizard Tournament."

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Many miles away, after an hour and a half of intense pain, which was greatly amusing Voldemort, Lucius, and several other Death Eaters Riddle had summoned for the show, Karkaroff – the traitor to both sides – died.

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As they were walking back to Gryffindor tower, Harry commented, "I'm alive. I hope that proves to everyone that I didn't put my name in the goblet."

"I hope so. I wonder where Karkaroff is?" said Hermione.

Ginny said, "I hope he didn't die alone."

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Chapter 30 – The Truth

Supper on the evening of the first task was a joyous event, celebrating each champion's victory over their dragon, and most importantly, that none were seriously injured. Harry had managed to talk Charlie Weasley's boss out of announcing Harry's victory over the horntail and gift of its remains. He certainly didn't want the attention that announcement would make. Harry made it a point to walk up and congratulate Cedric on a job well done.

"Thanks, but Krum was the best, no matter what the points say," replied Cedric.

"You really impressed Hermione turning that rock into a dog," persisted Harry. "All Krum did was shoot it in the eyes. He got some of the other eggs smashed."

"I suppose, but judging by what I heard from one of the dragon tamers about your fight with the dragons, you'd have easily taken first place!"

"It was nothing. You'd have done..."

"You didn't tell me you killed a horntail! You just said you escaped the dragons. Those dragon tamers worship you now. I think they're starting a Harry Potter fan club!"

"I hope you're joking," he said, shaking his head in irritation.

"I don't know about the club, but they're telling everyone they meet about your fight."

"Brilliant! That's just what I need. More attention."

-

Instead of talking about the first task of the tournament, the next morning's Daily Prophet had an article written by Rita Skeeter that basically said that Harry didn't think that one dragon was enough to face. Therefore he snuck into the fenced in area with the dragons and

killed one while they were sleeping. After that, the other dragons woke up and attacked, and he barely made it out alive.

“Ignore it,” was the advice that Hermione gave him as he glared at the article.

Harry did his best to ignore the sniggers that came mainly from the Slytherin table. He didn’t notice several students from the other houses telling each other what really happened according to the dragon handlers, reminding their classmates of the other lies that Skeeter had written.

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While Harry was ‘ignoring’ the article, several eyewitnesses, such as Charlie Weasley, were not. They apparated to the Daily Prophet headquarters to demand a retraction.

Charlie shouted at the editor, “That so-called reporter of yours just makes up stories to ruin people’s reputations! She doesn’t even bother to find out the facts! Every one of us saw Harry Potter thrown over the fence and forced to battle three dragons that were very much awake and come out on top! We can even provide you with the pensieve memories to prove it! None of us were approached for an interview about it! This isn’t the first time she’s lied about Harry either! I don’t know why you print her fiction in your paper, but it’s going to stop!”

“I don’t have to listen to you!” the red-faced editor shouted back at Charlie and the others.

“We’ll see about that!” he said and walked out of the office, followed by his coworkers.

“What now?” asked one when they exited the building, “Should we send some dragons to destroy the building?”

The others grinned at this idea. After a moment of contemplation, Charlie declared, “Maybe later. First we’ll try another solution.”

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Later that day, Mrs. Weasley was relaxing in the living room of the Burrow with their Wireless on when it was time for a call-in talk show that was listened to by over half the magical population in Europe. She was stunned as she recognized the voice of the current caller.

“Hello, I’m Charlie Weasley, one of the dragon handlers for the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts. I’m an eye witness to Harry Potter’s fight with the dragons, and it was nothing at all like Rita Skeeter reported in the Daily Prophet...”

He went on describing what really happened, and then had all the other witnesses give their names to affirm Charlie was telling the truth. He also explained the editor’s refusal to print a retraction. Then he went into what he knew about the article about Harry’s refusal to compete, which completely omitted Cedric Diggory’s part in the tournament. “Professor Dumbledore himself announced to the school that Skeeter was lying about that! My father, who works for the Ministry, has complained numerous times about how often the Daily Prophet, most often Rita Skeeter, is printing lies about people and events he has personal knowledge about.

“My question to you is why are you still paying for a paper full of lies that only trashes the reputations of innocent people, including the most famous young wizard in our world? I challenge you to boycott it. Cancel your subscriptions. You won’t miss any news anyway, but you won’t be lining Harry Potter’s current enemy’s pockets with Galleons.”

Although the host of the talk show normally didn’t allow a caller to talk for that long, she was actually quite interested in what Charlie had to say.

“I must say that I’m forced to agree with Mr. Weasley,” she said. “I’ve interviewed scores of people after the Daily Prophet has run a story on them and found out that it was pure fiction. I personally stopped receiving that paper over a year ago.”

As Molly continued listening to her favorite talk show, person after person floo-called to share another story of either Rita Skeeter or another Daily Prophet reporter lying about them or someone they knew. At the end of the show, she sent a note with Errol, canceling

their subscription. She had no idea how many other owls were given similar missions at the same time.

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The next morning at breakfast, Harry noted that much fewer newspapers were delivered to Hogwarts. In fact, Seamus Finnegan was the only Gryffindor in his year that got a paper, and he seemed nervous about taking it after he noticed several people glare at him. Harry wasn't one of them. He was simply eating his breakfast. The headline that he never read said, "Several Dragon Breeders from Bulgaria Slander Daily Prophet with Lies!" The paper also offered a discount for people wanting to resubscribe.

-

Over the next few weeks, the number of Daily Prophets delivered at Hogwarts and every other place kept diminishing more and more. The editor seemed too stubborn to retract any article, and kept accusing others of lying about the lack of truth printed on that toilet paper. A few days after the talk show, Ginny told them about it after receiving a letter from Charlie. Although Harry didn't like getting the attention, he hoped that the Daily Prophet would go out of business.

-

On the same day that his horntail armor arrived, Harry noticed that nobody received a copy of the Daily Prophet. He turned to his girlfriend. "I can't imagine Malfoy canceling his subscription. What do you suppose is going on?"

Giggling, she said, "What happened is what we've both been hoping would happen. I heard a rumor yesterday that the Daily Prophet was going out of business. I wasn't able to confirm it since no one in Gryffindor, nor any of our friends from other houses for that matter, subscribe to it. I checked the library and was shocked that even it doesn't receive the paper anymore."

Harry grinned. "Maybe they realized that there's no useful information in it."

Ginny giggled, "What if you feel like reading a bedtime story? Some of that fiction is very entertaining."

"I think they're showing their support of the truth, and, of course, Harry," said Neville.

"I do hope that another newspaper starts soon though," said a concerned Hermione.

"Only this time," said Ron, "Maybe for a change it can actually report news."

At that moment, Professor Dumbledore stood up and walked to his podium. "I'd wager that many of you have noticed that the Daily Prophet hasn't been delivered today. That is because, as several of you have probably guessed, it has gone out of business." There was much cheering at this point. "It is a pity, though. I will miss it. No other newspaper was as perfectly suited for wrapping fish freshly summoned out of the lake." Laughter followed that statement. "The editor learned the hard way that a newspaper is honor bound to report the truth. Speaking of news, I have an announcement to make, and you can rest assured that it is truthful. At precisely seven p.m. on Christmas Day, Hogwarts will be hosting a Yule Ball in this very room. It is a part of the Triwizard Tournament tradition. It will be open to fourth years and above, as well as their dates. I hope all who can attend will, as it should be an enjoyable event. I wish you all a good day."

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Chapter 31 – What's the News?

Almost every girl in the school applauded at Dumbledore's announcement of the ball, while several boys groaned. Harry looked at Hermione to judge her reaction. She had an almost wistful expression as she glanced at him, only to find he was looking at her. She blushed and turned away quickly.

Harry wasn't sure how he felt about the ball, and knew that he couldn't dance. However, he knew that he had to be a dutiful boyfriend, and it was obvious that Hermione wanted to go. Figuring that he might as well get it over with, he said, "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said, looking at him hopefully.

"Would you like to go to the ball with me?"

She smiled brightly, and he thought that smile was worth enduring a Yule Ball. "I'd love to, Harry."

"Good," he said as he smiled back at her, glad that he'd done something right. He looked at the package of horntail armor that had arrived minutes before Dumbledore's announcement. "Come on. I'd like to put on my armor before we go to class, and I'd like it if you would too."

"Sure."

They went to the Gryffindor common room, where he opened his package and took out Hermione's outfit, giving it to her. She went to her dormitory to change while he brought the box up to his. After he'd put his armor on beneath his clothes (all but the hood and gloves, which he put in his book bag), he put the box, which contained eight more outfits, into his trunk. He would give one to Sirius, Ron, Neville, and Ginny (they would magically shrink to the size of the wearer to be skin tight so they'd fit anyone from five feet to six-and-a-half feet tall). He'd still have four outfits to spare, but wasn't sure who to give them to, or if he should keep them as spares. He put his new boots on and walked down the stairs.

He saw that the common room was empty, so he sat down on a couch and waited for Hermione. After five minutes, he saw her walking down the stairs. She was wearing the boots, but he could see the bottom of her legs beneath her uniform skirt, so he assumed she was wearing the shorts without legs as they'd agreed on (whatever was practical for the situation). She looked a bit nervous as she approached him.

"Er, Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering. Um, I know the Dursleys wouldn't have taught...Do you know how to dance?"

A frown formed on his face as he put his head down, feeling a bit ashamed. He took a deep breath. Looking at the ground, he answered, "No. I'm sorry, I..."

"It's alright, Harry," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "I only asked because I thought I could teach you if you didn't know how."

He looked up at her with a neutral expression. "Teach me?"

"Yes. If you can learn advanced dueling, charming broomsticks to fly, and occlumency, then surely you can learn how to dance."

Nodding, Harry agreed, "When you put it that way, I suppose..."

"Excellent! We'll add that to our training." She took a deep breath. "I suppose you'll want to do it in your trunk so nobody knows."

"Of course. And don't tell anyone either."

"Don't worry," Hermione said with a big smile. "This'll be fun. I just have to borrow a...Wait a minute. That Pensieve Professor Dumbledore gave you for your birthday will be even better! I'll put memories of my dance lessons in there and we can go in together."

"You took dance lessons?"

“Yes. A few years before I came to Hogwarts. My parents thought it was important for me to learn ballroom dancing. It’ll be good for me to review as well.”

“I, I guess we can do it, but actually, the Pensieve is in my bedroom in my trunk, so we’ll still have to do it in there.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “We’d better get to class or we’ll be late.”

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Shortly after dinner, Harry and Hermione showed up at the Defense Against the Dark Arts office.

“Hi guys,” said Sirius with a grin.

“Hi Sirius, I mean, Professor Black,” said Harry.

“Hello,” said Hermione.

“Come on in.”

After they’d come inside and closed the door, Sirius asked, “What can I do for you?”

“Actually,” said Harry, “There are two things. The armor arrived this morning.”

“That’s great!”

“Yes it is. The other thing is that we need to do some...extra training in my trunk.”

He smiled. “Still obsessed with not being caught in the trunk. Even with wards against tampering on it.”

“We just don’t want it to be common knowledge that my trunk has an apartment inside it. I get enough grief over the closet. Everyone wants to hang their dress robes in it. I tell them to get their own.”

With a wink, Sirius said, "I'm not sure if I should let the two of you be alone in there..."

"If we were doing something...inappropriate, we wouldn't bring it to your office."

"So you bring it somewhere else for that?"

"No," said Harry, now blushing, "We stick to broom closets for that."

Chuckling, Professor Black said, "I see."

Harry pulled the miniaturized trunk out of his pocket and set it on the floor. He then resized it and opened the closet compartment, causing a small closet to pop out of the trunk.

Here's your dragon hide outfit," Harry said as he pulled it off the rack. He then grabbed the boots to go with it.

"Thanks!"

Harry then closed that compartment, and opened the one that had stairs leading down. "Ladies first," he said to his girlfriend, who smiled and began walking down. Once Harry got inside, he closed the trunk and set the security system.

They walked past the living (training) room, which now had a screen that Hermione had invented that showed a view of the room the trunk was in – in this case, Sirius' office.

When they entered his bedroom, Harry said, "Now, I've got you right where I want you!"

"That's funny. I thought I had you right where I wanted you," she replied with a smirk as she walked toward the desk where the Pensieve was kept. She put her wand to her temple and extracted the silvery memory, depositing it into the Pensieve. Grabbing his hand, she said, "Let's go," and they fell down into the memory.

-

Harry looked around and saw a short, bushy-haired little girl with buckteeth walking into a room with a blond-haired man who appeared to be in his early thirties. She was accompanied by Mrs. Granger, who hadn't changed much, aside from a few gray hairs.

"Hello, Miss Granger," said the man. "My name is Mr. Carsini, and I'll be your dance instructor."

"Hello, Mr. Carsini," the girl said politely.

"You really were little," said Harry to the older Hermione. "How old were you, anyway?"

"Nine," she said quickly, "Now be quiet and listen."

The man started playing a cassette of ballroom music. "Now, the first step I'll show you is..."

-

An agonizing hour later, the two of them emerged from the Pensieve. For Harry, it was agonizing because of his humiliation. For Hermione, it was for the frustration of being stepped on. She had mentioned that she was glad she was wearing her new boots. Otherwise he'd have injured her feet. Toward the end of the lesson, however, he had begun to catch on, and he agreed to practice with her every day until he'd gone through all the lessons, and then once a week until the ball. Hermione looked around the room as she sat down on the bed for a minute. She noticed something that she'd told Harry not to bring.

"Harry! Why do you have that Cupid painting in here?"

He chuckled. "I have the cure for it in the medicine cabinet."

"You're not seriously considering using that on someone, are you?"

"Only the deserving," answered Harry with an evil grin.

"Such as..." asked Hermione.

He looked at her for a moment with an unreadable expression. "You're not gonna turn this in to McGonagall like the broom, are you?"

She looked hurt. "Of course not. I only did that because I thought that broom would endanger your life. You said you understood."

He put his arms around her. "I do understand. I'm sorry I asked. I know better than to think you'd try to get me in trouble."

"Alright," she murmured into his chest. She then looked at him with mischief in her eyes. "So, who are you planning on using it on?"

-

Not long after, they left the trunk and Sirius asked, "Did you have fun?" with a wink.

Harry blushed but Hermione said, "Oh yes! I was in Harry's arms almost the whole time," and they walked off, hand in hand.

-

Exactly one week after the Daily Prophet had gone out of business, Harry was sitting at breakfast with Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Neville. Each of them was now wearing dragon armor beneath their clothes. Suddenly a huge flock of owls seemed to fill up the Great Hall, each of them laden with a parcel. One of them flew to each of the students. Harry untied the package from the owl's foot and it flew off, as did the other owls when they were relieved of their packages.

He unrolled it and found that he was holding a wizarding newspaper, but it wasn't the one he was familiar with. It was called, 'The Howler.'

Harry smiled, remembering the howler Ron had received a few years ago, and read the front page article.

"The Howler eats up the Daily Prophet after Readers Demand the Truth"

By Anna Jesse

Several weeks ago, a group of dragon tamers from Romania led by Charlie Weasley called into Listening Lucy Lenour's talk show to complain about the outright lies that the newspaper formerly known as the Daily Prophet printed on a regular basis.

The specific case that drove Mr. Weasley to this action was when the now bankrupt newspaper completely misrepresented an incident in which the wanted murderer Lucius Malfoy and accomplice Igor Karkaroff (believed to be dead) captured Harry Potter (the Boy-Who-Lived) and trapped him in an enclosure with three attacking dragons. Not only did Mr. Potter survive, but he managed to kill a Hungarian Horntail in front of the trapped dragon keepers.

'We'd never seen anything like it,' said Mr. Weasley. 'We all thought he was a goner. That fourteen-year-old boy shot a spell that actually killed a horntail. Normally it takes four of us casting together to even affect a dragon.' For more details on this story, see page eight.

The point is that the Daily Prophet reporter Rita Skeeter claimed that Harry had snuck in and killed the horntail while it was asleep, damaging his reputation. Those dragon tamers called upon the public to stop paying for a newspaper full of lies, and the public answered, canceling subscriptions until finally the so-called newspaper went bankrupt.

Their equipment and office were recently purchased by Augusta Longbottom, matriarch of the Longbottom family. 'Without communications, our society would fall apart. The wizarding world needed a reliable newspaper, and no one else seemed willing to do something about it, so I decided to buy it, and you'd better believe that I won't tolerate any lying from my reporters!' Madam Longbottom has long been a respected member of wizarding society known for her integrity.

She chased out several former Daily Prophet reporters attempting to gain employment, threatening to hex them. She claimed they deserved for the lies they'd spread. She hired a new staff and put out this special sample issue for every magical person in Europe. If you wish to continue receiving this paper, fill out and mail the subscription form on the last page of this issue."

Harry flipped through the newspaper happily, although he frowned while reading about Death Eater attacks. He (along with everyone else) turned to Neville, who had his face buried in his copy.

“How come you didn’t tell us your grandmother was starting a new newspaper?” asked Ginny.

“I, I didn’t know.”

“Well, I think that’s great, Neville,” said Harry. “I’m going to subscribe.”

Chapter 32 – A Christmas to Remember

Several students and staff members at Hogwarts subscribed to the Howler, and it was soon very common to see students all over the school reading it and discussing the latest news. Harry and Hermione were continuing all their training. Ginny was with them for extra studies (Animagus, Legilimency, wordless-wandless, etc.) and dueling. Neville was with them for karate and dueling. Ron (who'd apologized to Harry about his reaction to his refusal to participate in the tournament while Harry was in the hospital wing after being attacked by dragons) was with them for dueling and the Saturday defensive flying lessons. Sirius would help them with dueling and Animagus training. No one knew about Harry and Hermione's Pensieve dance lessons.

The holidays were approaching fast, and the Yule Ball with them. Neville was going to the ball with Ginny, but Ron had yet to invite anyone to be his date (not counting Fleur Delacour, whom he asked in a humorous and embarrassing way, running for it before she even answered). Fred and George had warned their younger brother that he'd better get a move on before all the good ones were taken.

About a week before Christmas, the night they finished their exams, Harry was in the common room reading the book on chess strategies that Hermione had bought him for his birthday during the summer. He'd been so busy with training that he actually hadn't read it before recently. He'd found the strategy that Ron usually used in chapter three, and memorized how to counter it. Ron was currently playing Neville in a game that looked like it was about to end. Harry closed the book and walked up the stairs to put it away. When he got back down, he found Ron just finishing up Neville's defeat.

"Checkmate."

"At least it's over," he conceded.

"Hey Ron," said Harry, walking up. "It's been awhile since we've played a game."

"Sure has," agreed the redhead. "Want to play?"

“Sounds good. Listen, do you remember the chess set Hermione’s parents gave me for my birthday?”

Ron grinned. “The one with all the pieces on broomsticks?”

“That’s the one. You wanna use it?”

“Sure. Go get it.”

-

Fifteen minutes later, Ron was very frustrated. A small crowd, including Fred, George, Ginny, Neville, and Hermione, had begun watching the game. Harry was very carefully following a strategy he’d memorized from his book while Ron’s face was getting red. Harry was forcing himself not to chuckle as Ron did everything the book said he would. Hermione was beaming at her boyfriend with pride.

After thinking for five minutes, Ron made his move. Harry couldn’t believe that Ron was still sticking with the same strategy as always, despite the fact that it wasn’t working. He made a show of waiting a minute before making the move his strategy demanded.

“Check!” said Ron excitedly as he took the piece Harry had purposely sacrificed.

Only when Harry smiled did Ron look back at the board and realize that he’d left his king open to attack. He had his head buried in his hands as Harry made his move and proudly proclaimed, “Checkmate.”

The gathered crowd all cheered. They’d never seen Ron beaten at his own game! (The Weasleys had while he was learning chess, but it had been years). Hermione bent down and kissed Harry before congratulating him.

“How?” whispered Ron. “You’ve never...”

“Don’t you remember the book on chess strategy that Hermione gave me last summer?”

"Oh...yeah," Ron said sadly.

"Your strategy for playing, as well as the way to beat it, is in that book."

"So it wasn't you beating me, it was some book Hermione gave you."

"Exactly. You taught me how to play chess, but not how to win against you. That's what the book did. It was obviously written by an even better player than you. According to the book, he's been playing in chess tournaments for forty years."

"Forty years, huh?"

"I'm sure that in forty years, you'll be even better than him," said Hermione.

"I guess," said Ron, somewhat mollified, deciding that it really wasn't Harry who beat him.

-

Time passed quickly, and Ginny fixed Ron up with a Ravenclaw girl from her year to go to the ball with. Harry decided to send Remus one of the horntail armor suits. On Christmas morning, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Harry, and Hermione planned to open their presents together. The girls were surprised when the boys came down the stairs accompanied by two house elves.

They quickly joined Hermione and Ginny in a corner, and Hermione immediately smiled at the elves. "Happy Christmas, Dobby and Winky. How are you two doing?"

"We is doing good, Miss Grangie," replied Dobby as tears began to fill his eyes. "Dobby knew that you is being a great witch, but never has a witch wished Dobby a happy Christmas before." At that moment, both he and Winky began to bawl.

Ginny spoke up. "Happy Christmas. Now two witches have done it."

Harry went through the presents they'd brought down the stairs and found the two that he'd bought for his elves. Hermione had reminded him to buy them presents the last time they were in Hogsmeade.

"Here's your Christmas present, Dobby." He handed one of the oddly wrapped presents to him. "Here's yours, Winky."

The elves were so overcome with emotion that they barely managed to unwrap their gifts. Dobby, who Harry knew enjoyed making socks, was given enough wool to make himself a hundred more of various colors. Harry was afraid that if he'd actually given Dobby socks he'd be free from their bond. Winky was given a bottle of perfume.

Hermione had also given the elves presents. Each got a different book on the evils of slavery that was written in America around the time of the Civil War. She bought Harry two presents. One was a book called *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*. The other was a Rolex that she admitted her parents helped pay for but, "It was my idea." She'd had it charmed to be unbreakable and completely waterproof.

Harry gave Hermione a gold necklace with a sapphire gem. "This matches the earrings you gave me for my birthday!" she exclaimed with a grin.

"I was kind of hoping you'd wear them tonight."

She smiled. "I was already planning to."

Harry then turned to Dobby upon grabbing another present, along with a note. "Dobby, come hear. I want you to deliver these two things an hour before the ball."

"Dobby is happy to serve the Great Harry Potter! Who is these going to?"

Harry whispered into the elf's ear who to give the wrapped painting to (along with instructions to take it back during the dance) and who to give the note to.

After Dobby disappeared, Ron asked, "What was that all about?"

Harry grinned. "You'll find out at the dance."

-

It was an hour before the Yule Ball, and Ron still hadn't met the girl he was escorting to the ball yet. Harry and Hermione did their exercise to stay in shape, but skipped the rest of their training in favor of enjoying Christmas with their friends. Harry was surprised at how early Hermione had left to prepare for the ball, but decided not to say anything about it. Now all the fourth-year Gryffindor boys were in their dorm putting on their dress robes.

"I'm sure glad Ginny got me these robes," said Ron. "If she hadn't gotten that money for catching Crouch Jr., I would've had to wear that ghastly creation mum gave me and been the laughing stock of the school."

"Yeah, from what you and Ginny said, they must've been awful."

"I wish Ginny would tell me who this 'really nice girl' is that she's set me up with. All I know about her is that she's supposedly got beautiful blonde hair and is interesting to talk to."

Harry chuckled. "I do agree that I'd want to know who I'm going out with. But then again, it's your own fault. You should've asked som..."

"I know. I know. She's probably teaching me a lesson. I just hope it's not some ugly troll nobody else wants to date."

"Just remember to be nice no matter who it is, mate. Even if you don't like her, it's not her fault. She's doing you a favor by going with you."

Ron sighed. "I guess."

-

Before they knew it, Harry, Ron, and Neville were standing in the Gryffindor common room waiting for the girls. Ron's date was supposed to meet him just outside the Great Hall so he was waiting to walk down there with the rest of them.

Ginny came down first in amber robes that really suited her. Neville immediately walked up to her. "Y-you look b-b-beautiful, G-Ginny." She blushed.

"I agree," said Harry. "You do look very nice."

"Thank you Neville and Harry. You both look good as well." She shot Ron a quick glare for not politely complimenting her.

"Do you know if Hermione's about ready yet?" asked Harry.

"Yes. She'll be down any second now."

As though summoned, Harry's girlfriend appeared on the staircase, and all thoughts of anything besides Hermione flew out of Harry's head. He'd never remember what she wore that night, but he'd always remember how beautiful she looked. He took her hand when she reached the bottom of the staircase and looked deep into her eyes.

"You look...so..." He took a deep breath. "gorgeous, beautiful, perfect. I..."

He was silenced by a quick kiss. "Thank you very much, Mr. Potter," she said while her cheeks turned pink. "You look quite handsome, yourself. Shall we go?"

Harry didn't pay much attention to what was said as he walked hand-in-hand with his angel, obeying the philosophy, 'Follow the pretty girl,' as she led him down the staircases until finally they were outside the doors of the Great Hall. Harry was taken out of his trance by Ron's voice.

"We're here, Ginny. Where's my date?"

"Right there," said Ginny as she pointed out a girl with waist-length blonde hair. She was wearing a sleeveless light blue dress and a necklace made of butterbeer caps. She had protuberant eyes, and her wand was held behind her left ear. "Come here, Luna."

Ron's eyes bulged out when he saw the necklace. As Luna walked toward them, Ginny whispered, "If you're not nice to her, bat bogeys won't be the only thing you're running from." Ron swallowed.

"Er, Hello, Luna. I'm Ron Weasley."

"I know," she answered. "I'm Luna Lovegood. Ginny said you're so desperate for a date that you'll take me. Since I'm a third year, this is the only way I can come." She then turned to the others. "You're Harry Potter."

"I know," replied Harry with a smirk.

"And you're Hermione Granger. A lot of people think you should've been a Ravenclaw."

"I'm happy in Gryffindor, thanks." At that moment, the doors were opened.

"We'd better get inside, before the Yartsprees start infesting the hall."

Ron looked at Ginny with an expression that clearly meant, 'This girl is loony!' but was only rewarded a giggle as Ginny took Neville's hand and walked in, followed quickly by Harry and Hermione. Reluctantly, Ron took Luna's hand and walked in.

-

Harry was sitting at a table with his girlfriend and their friends when he noticed something. "Look. The champions and their dates are sitting at the table with the old people."

"Not only that," replied Hermione, "but they have to start off the dancing."

"That alone is reason enough to refuse to participate," replied Harry.

"But you're very good at dancing, now," she whispered back.

"That doesn't mean I want everybody to watch me."

“Good point.” Hermione then glanced at the teachers’ table again. “Snape seems like he’s in a more foul mood than usual.”

Harry half-snorted but then regained his composure. “I wonder why.”

-

The dinner proceeded very well, aside from Ron glaring at Ginny whenever Luna would refer to an imaginary creature. Finally, the music started and Harry immediately stood up. “Hermione, may I have this dance?”

“You most certainly may.”

Ginny looked straight at her brother with a look that he knew he had to take seriously and tilted her head toward Luna. “Er, Luna,” he said, stumbling as he got up. “Wanna dance?”

The blonde girl smiled brightly. “If you’d like, Ronald.”

“Ginny,” said Neville shyly, “W-would you like to dance?”

-

Harry and Hermione were in the middle of the dance floor, holding each other as they’d practiced, moving to the music with ease.

“I never thought I’d actually enjoy dancing,” said Harry.

She grinned as plans of dragging him out dancing every Saturday night for the rest of their lives formed in her head. “I think it’s more about who you’re dancing with.”

“That’s probably true, but I’m sure you’re glad I’m not stepping on your feet anymore.”

She giggled. “I’ll admit that, but even then I still enjoyed being in your arms.”

“Thank you for being my girlfriend.”

“Thank you for asking me.”

-

"I'm so sorry, Ginny," apologized Neville as he stepped on her feet yet again.

"It's alright, Neville. You're just a bit nervous. I think you're trying a bit too hard."

Neville had a faraway expression for a few seconds before he gave Ginny a lopsided smile. "I should've asked someone I hated to be my date. Then I'd have gotten to step on her feet all night without any consequences." Both he and Ginny laughed at that joke.

-

At that moment, the doors burst open, revealing Mr. Filch in a very greasy-looking old wizarding tuxedo. "Severus!" he called out sweetly. "I know you wanted me to stay in my quarters until you got back, but I had to see you! The knife I always carry allowed me to cut the ropes you tied me to my bed with."

If looks could kill, the head of Slytherin house would have vaporized Filch where he stood. Snape stood up and turned toward the nearest exit.

"Severus, I love you!" Argus declared as he ran up to the greasy-haired git. He closed his eyes and puckered up his lips as he moved his face toward Snape, who quickly conjured a snake to meet Filch's lips.

Keeping his eyes closed, Argus thoroughly snogged the snake as the crowd watched in amusement. As soon as they separated, Snape vanished it. When the caretaker opened his eyes, the serpent was already gone. "Severus, I never knew you had such a wicked tongue!" he declared dreamily, causing more laughter than he'd already done. "I knew you loved me, too!"

"I DO NOT LOVE YOU!"

"Your words say one thing, but your tongue said another thing. Why don't we go outside and snog some more?" He grabbed Snape

before he could react and got him to the door before Snape finally managed to stun him.

The laughter didn't stop as Severus levitated Filch away. "Obviously someone has slipped him a love potion! When I find out who it was, you'll be begging for expulsion! I'm taking Mr. Filch to the hospital wing."

"That's where you say you're taking him, anyway," said one of the Weasley twins just as the door closed.

Even Hermione was laughing with Harry by now. "You did that, didn't you?" she whispered in his ear.

"Uh-huh," he whispered back. "I had Dobby deliver the painting to Filch and a note to Snape to come to Filch's quarters. Apparently Snape managed to tie him up before the dance, but he was determined to see him here. It'll wear off in twenty-four hours, and Dobby should have already returned the picture of Cupid."

-

Ron was standing on the dance floor with Luna watching Snape leaving with Filch, laughing with everyone else. Luna said, "I don't think that Mr. Filch was given a love potion."

The redhead's eyes widened. "Neither do I."

"I think there are bleetrops in the castle affecting him."

Ron gave her a strange look. "What?"

"Which means that the nargles won't be here," she said excitedly. "Come on, Ronald! I don't really like dancing anyway." He went along helplessly as Luna Lovegood pulled him under nearby mistletoe and started enthusiastically kissing him.

-

Harry and Hermione danced the rest of the night away, barely aware that there were other people in the room until finally the dance was

over and they had to head back toward their dorm, stopping to inspect a few broom closets along the way. When they arrived in their common room, they found Neville and Ginny snogging on a couch. They were about to find an empty couch and do the same when the door opened again, revealing a spaced-out-looking Ron.

He took a few steps forward as Neville and Ginny broke apart quickly. The youngest Weasley male declared, "I've got a girlfriend."

Chapter 33 – Being Observant

The rest of the holidays went by quickly as Harry and Hermione (along with the others) continued daily training. A few days after Christmas; Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny were sitting together while Ron was sitting with Luna. They noticed that Professor Dumbledore wasn't in the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I wonder where he's off to," said Neville.

"Probably Wizengamot business," suggested Hermione.

"I think it's about the war," said Harry as he flipped through the 'Howler' newspaper to see who Voldemort's latest victims were.

"Have there been any attacks?" asked Ginny.

"No. No news about him at all. That's what worries me. He must be planning something big."

"What are you four conspiring about?" asked Sirius from behind Harry, startling him.

"Professor Black," said Neville, "We're just wondering where Professor Dumbledore is."

He eyed all four of them with a worried expression on his face. "He wouldn't say, but I think he's doing a bit of...soul searching right now." He winked at Harry and comprehension dawned on his face.

"I'm surprised he didn't ask for your help," said Harry.

"He seems to think that he has to do everything by himself."

"That's stupid!" said Harry.

"It certainly is," said Hermione pointedly. "I'm glad I convinced you not to do the same thing last summer."

He grinned at her while squeezing her hand. "So am I."

“Why would he want your help to do soul-searching?” asked Neville, confused.

“Er,” said Ginny, who then looked to Harry, Hermione, and Sirius – all of whom shook their heads. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s a secret. Sorry I asked,” said Neville with a neutral expression.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Neville. I do,” said Harry, “I’m just concerned that you don’t know Occlumency.”

“We don’t want there to be any chance of Voldemort finding out what we know. It could be disastrous,” said Hermione.

“Sorry, Neville,” said Sirius, “but I agree. I don’t trust Snape no matter what the headmaster says, and he could read the information right out of your head. We can’t take that risk.”

“So if I learned Occlumency you’d tell me your secrets?”

“Some of them,” said Harry, “but it would take about four months for you to master it.”

“But it would stop You-Know-Who from being able to read my mind?”

“Yes, if you master it.”

“Then could one of you teach me?”

Harry took a deep breath. “I suppose one of us could teach you that while we practice Legilimency. That means we’ll be looking into your mind. You may want to think about which of us does that. I’ll get you the book to read tonight when we go back to the dorm.”

-

Dumbledore did not show up for lunch or dinner that day. Neville decided to let Ginny begin his Occlumency lessons until she couldn’t get through his defenses. Then someone else would take over his training.

When they got to breakfast the next morning, Sirius walked over to them immediately with a concerned look on his face. "Morning, guys."

"From the look on your face, it's not a good morning," said Harry.

"No. Professor Dumbledore did return late last night, but he was injured."

"How?" asked Hermione.

"Somehow his right hand has been...I don't know – killed. It's still there, but completely black like it's been burned. When he got here, he immediately asked for Snape's help and no one else's. I wonder if his hand could've been saved by someone else."

"I wouldn't put it past Snape..." said Harry.

"Was Professor Dumbledore successful?" asked Hermione.

"I think so," Padfoot said vaguely, "but he wouldn't say."

"How is he, apart from his hand?" asked Ginny.

"He seems to be alright. He's in the hospital wing right now and Madam Pomfrey has taken over his care. You know she doesn't let anyone leave until they've spent at least a day with her." The others put on small smiles at that proclamation.

-

By the time Christmas break was over, Dumbledore was in fact sitting at the head table pretending that nothing was wrong. Ron had spent most of his time with his new girlfriend 'inspecting broom cupboards for Yartsprees,' but still kept up with dueling practice.

In the first week of January; Harry, Hermione, and Ginny finally finished the advanced Charms book they'd been studying since the summer and began another one that was beyond N.E.W.T level and included the Fidelius Charm. They also reached chapter thirty of the Wordless/Wandless magic book, which began the section on wandless magic.

“It says that for our first spell we should use something simple,” said Hermione, “so I suggest the levitation spell we learned in first year.” She then pulled three quills out of her bag and set one in front of each of them. “First cast it silently with your wand to get the feel of the spell and then try without it.”

All three of them were easily able to levitate a quill with their wand, but after their first attempt without a wand, none of them had moved. “This isn’t working,” said Ginny frustratedly.

“We’ll have to spend more time than this on it,” said Harry, “although that quill is getting on my nerves.”

“Close your eyes and concentrate hard on it. Use the meditative exercises we’ve learned for other purposes.”

Harry closed his eyes and his expression went from anger to peace in a few minutes as his breathing became deeper. After about five minutes, the quill began slowly rising.

“You did it!” exclaimed Hermione. The quill immediately fell as Harry’s eyes opened. “Sorry.”

“No. We’ve got to be able to keep our magic working even when there are distractions,” said Harry wisely. “We also need to be able to do this without meditating for an hour first.”

“Remember how we used to have to meditate before using our full power before?” asked Ginny, earning nods from the other. “Now our magic is always more powerful than it was. I’ll bet the same thing happens with this. I’m going next.”

It took Ginny seven minutes, but she also managed to get the quill to rise. Then Hermione did it in six minutes.

They ended that part of their daily training on a positive note, sure that they would be able to master that skill within a few months.

-

A week before Valentine's Day, they had a Hogsmeade weekend, so Harry and Hermione were walking hand-in-hand toward the bookshop when Harry stopped suddenly and tensed up.

"You see him, too," said Hermione.

"Uh huh." Through the use of their special contact lenses, both of them were seeing a disillusioned man in a black cloak, wearing a Death Eater mask.

Chapter 34 – Explosion

Through the use of their special contact lenses, Harry and Hermione silently watched a disillusioned man in a black cloak, wearing a Death Eater mask until Harry came up with a plan.

“Hermione,” he whispered, “Keep an eye on him while I get help.”

“How long will you be gone?” she asked with concern.

“Just a minute. I’m just going around the corner to call Dobby. If you scream, I’ll hear you. Be careful. Oh, and put your hood and gloves on.” He added that at the last second as he remembered the armor they were wearing. He followed his own advice, pulling his gloves out of his pocket.

He kissed her and hurried to a good spot. “Dobby.”

He heard a small pop in front of him. “Yes, the Great Harry Potter sir is calling Dobby and Dobby is...”

“Dobby, tell Professor Dumbledore that I have just seen a disillusioned Death Eater in this area, and that Hermione and I are following him. Ask him to come and bring help. I’m afraid that they’re preparing to attack. After that, get both mine and Hermione’s invisibility cloaks and bring them to me.”

“Yes, sir,” the elf said before vanishing with another small pop. Harry stuck his neck around the corner to make sure Hermione was alright. She was watching the Death Eater enter the book store and taking a few steps toward it when he hissed, “Wait a minute,” causing her to stop and look at him. “We’ll go in together once Dobby brings us something important.”

-

Professor Dumbledore was sipping a cup of tea inside his office when he was interrupted by a frantic-looking Dobby. “Professor Dumbledore, sir.”

“Hello, Dobby. What can I do for you?”

“Master Harry Potter is seeing a Death Eater being disillusioned and walking around Hogsmeade. He and his Grangy is watching the bad wizard and is asking Dobby to tell you and ask you to help. Master Harry Potter is believing that the Death Eaters is preparing to attack.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” the headmaster said as he rose to his feet. Dobby disappeared with a small pop. As though summoned, his wand appeared in his blackened hand and he began sending out Patroni to various faculty members.

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About a minute after Harry spoke to Hermione, Dobby appeared in front of them holding two invisibility cloaks. “Dobby is telling Albus Dumbledore Master Harry Potter’s message and is getting the cloaks. Master Harry Potter, sir, here is your cloak and here is your Grangy’s cloak.”

“Thanks, Dobby.” He turned to his girlfriend. “I believe this would count as an emergency situation to use your cloak in, don’t you agree?”

“Give it here,” she said with a grin.

A minute later, both of them were entering the bookstore as a third year student they didn’t know opened the door to exit. They looked around and soon found that the Death Eater was standing near the entrance with his wand out, clearly waiting for something. Deciding that it would be stupid to wait and see what the murderer was planning on doing, Harry pulled out his wand, got behind the Death Eater, pushed his wand out of the cloak just enough to aim and silently stupefy him. The criminal, still invisible, fell with a thud, hitting a shelf and knocking a few books down.

“What was that?” asked a lot of kids as Harry shot another spell at the Death Eater, revealing him for all to see as ropes were conjured around him.

“It’s a Death Eater! How’d he get stunned? Who did that?”

Still invisible, Harry did what he thought was a reasonable course of action. He lied. Changing his voice as best he could, he began speaking. "Yes that's a Death Eater, and I stunned him because I'm an auror. We believe the village is about to be attacked, and this git was going to trap you in here. I suggest you all head back to Hogwarts calmly while I check out other businesses for more criminals."

He watched the students rush toward the door as he heard Hermione whisper with an amused tone of voice, "Good job, Auror Potter. Where do you want to go next?"

Facing the direction her voice came from, he answered, "The Three Broomsticks. It's likely to have more than one because most students end up there."

"We've got to hurry. I think those students will let the Death Eaters know we're onto them and the attack will start sooner."

"You're right. Er, um..." She heard him take a deep breath. "We won't have time to get everywhere. We'll have to split up and stop as many as we can while before the attack begins. You take this side of the street and go toward Madam Puddifoot's, and I'll take the other side. I'll start at the Three Broomsticks and go toward the Hog's Head. Go in every store you see. Take care of yourself."

"You, too. I love you."

"I love you, too, Hermione. We've got to go, now!"

-

While panicked students were running toward Hogwarts and Hermione entered Honeydukes, Harry made his way into the Three Broomsticks. He gasped when he realized how right he was. There were five disillusioned enemies inside, one of which was looking out the window. Harry started with her, knowing she'd notice the students running right past the pub. He put a silencing spell on her and stunned her so she fell silently.

He looked at the others for a response, but no one had noticed. He moved closer to the next one and did the same thing, only revealing the tip of his wand at the last possible second. The fourth one he stunned saw him at the last moment and shouted, "YOU!" just before being stunned. The crowd heard both the voice out of nowhere and the noise of him dropping. Harry didn't see the point of silencing him after he'd shouted.

The last Death Eater in the building panicked at that point and started throwing dark curses at random students for about ten seconds before falling down from a silent reducto sent by Harry, separating his head from his body and cancelled the disillusionment at the moment of death. Harry figured that once he started hurting innocent people, the Death Eater didn't deserve any mercy. He quickly surveyed the damage and noticed that a few students were bleeding badly, and one, Seamus Finnegan, was dead from the avada kadavra the now decapitated murderer had sent. Madam Rosmerta was trying to help the wounded.

Blinking back tears and taking a deep breath, Harry ran out of there toward the closest business – in this case the post office. Just before he went inside, he heard an explosion. He looked around and saw that what used to be Scrivenshaft's Quill shop was in ruins. He panicked when he realized that that was one of the stores he'd sent Hermione to check. He started running in that direction when he heard panicked screams from the much nearer post office. Looking between the two locations, he realized that the right place to go would be the post office, but he wanted to make sure Hermione was alright.

Before he made a decision, he heard a few dozen pops at the same time. For a moment, he believed it was Death Eater reinforcements. Then he recognized the red auror uniforms as they stormed every building, including the post office. He also noticed Professor Dumbledore leading several teachers, including Sirius Black, into town as well.

Harry ran as fast as he could toward the remains of Scrivenshaft's and looked around as the others fought. After looking at victim after victim, he noticed his girlfriend lying unconscious with blood on her face. Most of her body was underneath a large layer of wood from the

building. He didn't notice the battle ending with a victory for the good guys as he surveyed the senseless destruction. Pulling off his cloak, he levitated all the wood off of her body and set it to the side. Automatically, he grabbed her invisibility cloak, which had been covering her left leg.

"Mr. Potter," said a familiar voice behind him as he was nervously stuffing the cloaks in his pockets. He turned to see that Madam Pomfrey had spoken to him.

"You've got to help her! I told her to go this way."

"I will," she said as he moved out of her way so she could work. After about a minute, she turned to Harry. "She's got several bruises and a few broken bones, but she should be fine thanks to the dragon hide armor she's wearing. I'm going to portkey her to Hogwarts, where a healer should be by now, and look at the other victims."

"Can I go with her?"

"Of course."

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Moments later, Harry found himself in the hospital wing with Hermione, still unconscious. She had appeared on a bed and he was lying on the floor next to that bed.

"Hello. I'm Healer Cochran. Do you know what happened to this girl," came a woman's voice from behind him as he stood up.

"She, she was in Scrivenshaft's when it exploded. She was under a lot of wood when I found her." He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue. He carefully repeated what Madam Pomfrey had said before he was shooed out of the room so Hermione could be thoroughly examined.

He waited outside for an eternal fifteen minutes, sitting on the floor and berating himself over and over for separating from his girlfriend. He tried to tell himself that she must have saved every person in Honeydukes, Zonkos, and Gladrags before entering Scrivenshaft's

Quill shop, but all he could think about was the fact that he sent her in that direction and now she was hurt. Thoughts of Seamus' death that he couldn't prevent also added to his bad mood. He didn't notice when tears began to fall down his cheeks as he wished it had been him lying on the hospital bed instead of Hermione.

"Mr. Potter, you can come in and talk to Miss Granger for a few minutes. She's awake. I've just healed her injuries, but she's very exhausted. If you'll excuse me, I have several other patients."

"Thanks," he said, getting up from the floor as he hurried to her bed. He saw Hermione lying down wearing a hospital gown with a sheet pulled up past her stomach. She grinned up at him.

"Hi, Harry. I'm told you found me. Thank you."

"I am soooo sorry that I didn't stay with you when..."

"We had to separate to help the most people. Did you get to the Three Broomsticks on time?"

Looking down, he answered, "No. When I got there, I found five Death Eaters."

"Five," she asked, shocked by the news.

"After I stunned the first four, the last one started hexing everyone he could. I think he hurt about five students. Seamus is dead."

"Oh no!"

"All because I was too stupid to..."

"Stop that right now, Harry! You did the best you could! There was only one Death Eater in every store I entered."

"But you got them."

"And got overconfident. When I entered Scrivenshaft's, I didn't see any Death Eater by the door where they usually were, so I walked further inside. I didn't think that there might be a reason why none

were there. I should've had everyone leave instead of waste time looking everywhere. I was so sure I knew what their plan was. It's my fault all those people got hurt. It's my fault if any..."

"No. It's not your fault." For a brief moment, a half-smile crossed his lips as he repeated her words. "You did the best you could."

Harry sat there with her until Sirius visited fifteen minutes after Harry started talking to her. From him, they learned that Neville and Ginny both took out one of the two attackers at Madam Puddifoot's. Ron and Luna had been at the Hog's Head when the explosion occurred and the two enemies there began the attack. Together, they took out one while the bartender stunned the other. Four Ravenclaws had been in the building with Hermione when it exploded and were injured, but were all expected to fully recover. Hermione had taken the worst of the explosion, but her armor had saved her. A few owls were killed in the Post Office, but the aurors managed to save everyone else in there.

The teachers and aurors managed to subdue the rest of the attacking force, and very few escaped. Unfortunately, the ones that were captured or killed seemed to be new recruits to Voldemort's forces, so this attack was believed to be a training exercise.

Seamus was the only student killed, and only fifteen students were injured. All of the injured were expected to recover, although some of them got scars. Six Death Eaters were killed. A dozen were captured. At least five escaped, although there's no way to know exactly how many got away because they were, well, gone and couldn't be counted.

As Harry and Sirius were leaving the hospital wing after being kicked out when Hermione started getting drowsy, they met Neville, Ginny, Ron, and Luna, who were about to visit Hermione. Harry informed them that she was sleeping. When they went to the Great Hall for the next meal, they found that black banners were hanging in memory of Seamus. They slowly took their places at Gryffindor's table (Luna sat with Ron) as Dumbledore offered a toast in honor of, "Seamus Finnegan, the latest victim in this bloody war."

Chapter 35 – Time Flies

Over the course of the next week, most of the school seemed subdued, especially the Gryffindors of Seamus' year. Dean really seemed depressed since they were best friends.

As Harry made his way to the hospital wing to visit Hermione, he found himself feeling guilty for not really missing Seamus much. He felt bad that Seamus died, but was relieved that Hermione had lived.

He wasn't surprised when the announcement that there would be no more Hogsmeade visits was made, but he didn't like seeing aurors walking around Hogwarts. There weren't that many – he'd counted five in the whole school. He just wasn't happy that the times demanded extra security. Most of them didn't say anything to him, but a few stared at his scar the first time they saw him. As much as he wished they weren't at Hogwarts, part of him was glad that there was always one guarding the hospital wing.

He nodded at the guard, opened the door and walked straight up to Hermione's bed to find she was awake and absorbed with a very large book.

"I don't think Madam Pomfrey would approve of that heavy lifting," he commented, startling his girlfriend.

"Oh, hi Harry. This book isn't heavy. I just thought I'd do..."

"A bit of light reading?" he asked with a smirk, earning a quick glare. "I'm sorry. How are you feeling?"

She sighed. "Physically, fine. But I'm going stir crazy. I need to get up and go outside in the fresh air. I need to get back to our training. How have you been able to stand staying here when you've had to?"

"It's difficult; I understand. How long has she sentenced you to stay in this jail, anyway?"

Sighing, Hermione answered, "Another two days. I told her I'll take it easy, but she wants to be extra careful. Anyway, how are you doing?"

He took her hand. "I miss having you with me most of the time. I miss doing this." He bent down and kissed her lightly. She put a hand on his head to stop him from pulling away as she began deepening the kiss.

"Mr. Potter," came Madam Pomfrey's voice from behind them. They broke apart immediately. "Being allowed to visit patients does not include snogging them."

"It should," he replied with a smirk. "It would help the patients feel better."

"Snogging as therapy," said Hermione with faraway look in her eyes. "I think Harry and I should do a study."

"I don't," said Poppy as the young couple started laughing. "Shouldn't you be headed off to class, now?"

"No, my next class isn't for over a half-hour."

"Maybe you should go there early."

"Fine," replied Harry, knowing he wouldn't win an argument with Madam Pomfrey. He turned to Hermione. "I'll see you later. Don't do that study with anybody else."

She giggled. "I won't as long as you visit me later."

"Deal. I'll bring Ron, Luna, Ginny, and Neville with me." He took her hand and held it for a moment. "Take care of yourself."

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Hermione was released from the Hospital Wing the day before the second task, and they spent as much time as possible 'conducting their study' despite the fact that Hermione was recovered and they couldn't take notes in broom closets. Harry repeatedly affirmed that "it's all for research." They did take time out to train so Hermione could get back to it before she was out of shape. Things had gotten back to normal, and the students were excited about the tournament again.

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Hand in hand, Harry and Hermione walked to the lake with everyone else on February 24th to watch the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. Ron, Luna, Neville and Ginny were with them. As was now usual, a few aurors were present.

"I wonder what this task will be," said Hermione.

"Probably fight the giant squid," answered Ron.

"I doubt that," said Neville as they took their seats. "I think they'll have to find a rare plant at the bottom of the lake."

"Or perhaps they'll have to rescue a moshipus with its foot buried in mud," said Luna.

"I hope whatever they do isn't under the water, cause if it is, what's the point of us watching?" asked Ginny.

Before anyone could answer, Dumbledore began announcing that the task was for each champion to rescue a hostage being held at the bottom of the lake.

"That's horrible," said Hermione while the three champions were preparing. "Last time, all the champions had to do was rescue an egg, now it's the person they'd miss most!"

Harry paled. "If I'd have allowed them to keep me in the tournament, you'd be down there right now."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm perfectly content up here, thank you very much. That's not my idea of a way to proclaim your love." They paused their conversation for a moment to watch the champions dive down in the lake.

"I wonder how they got the hostages to go along with it," said Ginny.

"I don't know. They're probably safe down there, even if the champion doesn't rescue them," said Hermione.

“There are creatures in that lake! What if one of the champions frees a hostage, but then drops them and the grindylows get them?” said Harry.

Hermione’s eyes went wide before Neville added, “There are also some dangerous plants there, too; they’d eat anybody dropped on them.”

“Or a triple-horned Spedwork,” added Luna.

Ignoring the blonde girl’s statement, Hermione said, “They’d probably be defenseless. I’ll bet Dumbledore put them in an enchanted sleep of some kind.”

“They’d be torn to pieces, and never know what got them!” said Ron.

Harry said, “This is ridiculous! No wonder there have been so many deaths in this bloody tournament.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Hermione said, “There’s nothing we can do about it now except hope for the best.”

They spent about thirty seconds watching the surface of the lake before Ginny declared, “This is boring.”

Hermione agreed. “Yes. I wish I’d brought a book along.”

Ron acted like he was going to die of shock. “You, Hermione Granger, actually came here without a book.”

“I wasn’t bored at the first task, so I didn’t think I would be now.”

“I rather enjoy watching the ripples on the surface of the lake,” said Luna. “Did you know that they’re really caused by...”

After spending about five minutes listening to Miss Lovegood’s description of yet another creature the Quibbler once had an article about, Harry noticed something. “Hey, it looks like there’s some activity at the surface. Maybe someone’s rescued their hostage.”

It turned out that Fleur had withdrawn from the task because she couldn't get past the grindylows. They waited and waited until finally Cedric emerged with Cho. About two minutes later, Victor followed with his hostage, the girl he'd taken to the Yule Ball. A bell sounded, signaling that the task was over, and a few minutes later a merman surfaced, carrying a little girl that looked a lot like Fleur with him. The female champion rushed over to her sister and hugged her tightly. In the end, Fleur got twenty-five points; Viktor got forty-five points; and Cedric got forty-six points.

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The rest of the school year seemed to fly by after that. Voldemort was attacking different people and places, but was leaving Hogwarts and its students alone. Occasionally, some students would be informed that a member of their family had been killed, but for the most part, it seemed like the war had left Hogwarts.

February soon turned into March, bringing with it Ron's birthday, for which they had a small party. It was there that Neville commented that his grades were actually improving since he began studying Occlumency with Ginny. Not long after that, she couldn't break into her boyfriend's mind, so Harry took over his training. In the middle of that month, Harry, Hermione and Ginny finished the Wordless/Wandless Book and were able to do most things wandlessly.

Ron, Neville, and Luna decided around this time that they didn't want to be left behind and began studying the subjects that the other three had begun with, getting occasional help from the others.

Soon April came, and with it, Easter Break. By that time, Harry and Hermione (and Ginny, but she wasn't there) had gotten through enough of the advanced charms book that they were able to put Grimmauld place under the Fidelius Charm with Sirius as secret-keeper. Dumbledore had asked him to make the place the Order's headquarters, but Sirius declined, saying that he had Harry living there, and neither of them wanted Snape to be visiting the house. In the end, Dumbledore reluctantly decided to use his own house.

Just before Easter Break, Harry had sent Neville to Dumbledore, saying that he couldn't break through his Occlumency shields asking if he'd continue training him. During the last week of April, the headmaster told Neville that he had mastered Occlumency.

A few days later, Neville was told about the prophecy.

After sitting there facing Harry and Hermione for about a minute, he finally spoke. "Wow. If Vol-Voldemort had just chosen differently, I'd have had to kill him?" Harry nodded. Neville put his head down. "He certainly chose right. I'd never have a chance. I..."

"You're ahead of everyone but our group in Defense, and at the top of our class in Herbology," said Hermione.

"You're just as able as I am," said Harry firmly. "I've practiced some things a bit more than you have, but now that you're studying that stuff, you'll catch up in no time." He then looked Neville in the eye and said something he hadn't discussed with anyone. Hermione gasped but stayed silent. "If I fail in my task, then you'll be the only one with a chance of fulfilling the prophecy. You'll have to destroy Voldemort. I have every confidence in you."

"B-but if you c-can't..."

"Then you'll learn from my mistake and do the job right." Harry then grinned at his friend. "Kick him one extra time for me."

That comment lightened the mood a bit, and they told Neville about Horcruxes (mentioning that Dumbledore didn't know that they knew about them, and that the headmaster had been after a Horcrux when his hand was hurt). Harry also mentioned that they didn't know for sure how many Horcruxes there were.

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During the month of May, there seemed to be a break in Death Eater activity. Everyone silently believed that they were planning something big, but no one would voice that opinion. When June came without any attack, people got more and more nervous, as Harry could tell by

the contingent of aurors that were present when the final task of the Triwizard Tournament began.

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Chapter 36 – Coming and Going

“Another boring task we can’t really see,” complained Ginny, as she, Neville, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Luna were sitting in the stands staring at walls of shrubbery that Cedric Diggory had just entered.

“This time, I came prepared,” said Hermione as she pulled a book out of her bag. “I have others, in case you’d like to read as well.”

Ginny took a book, but that was all. Luna had a copy of the *Quibbler* with her. None of the books were about Quidditch, so Ron wasn’t interested. Neville had brought a book on plants with him. Harry, however, was too busy looking around the stands with a worried expression on his face to notice Viktor Krum entering the maze.

“Harry,” said Hermione softly, “Do you really think that Voldemort’s going to attack here?” She indicated the dozens of aurors stationed around the area. Even the Minister of Magic, Patricus Vehosia, was confident enough that he was there (surrounded by aurors).

“No, and that’s just it.” He sighed. “Everyone thinks he’s going to attack here, but he’s not.” He put a hand on his scar. “My scar is twinging a tiny bit.”

Her eyes widened. “What? I thought that Occlumency...”

“It’s not hurting. It probably would be, though, without it. I know he’s doing something, and it obviously isn’t here where most of the aurors are. Maybe I should...”

“No,” she hissed emphatically. “Whatever advantage that dropping your shields could give you is not worth it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am,” she said, just before Fleur Delacour, firmly in third place, finally entered the maze. She finally got Harry to take an Advanced Charms book from her.

They sat there reading for about an hour until finally Cedric Diggory emerged the winner, with the Triwizard cup held high for all to see. His father was the first to congratulate him, hugging him tightly before his mother joined them. Harry's group, along with most of the audience, was on their feet cheering.

Just as the cheering was subsiding, Patricus Vehosia walked up in front of the crowd of happy faces to make a speech. He performed a Sonorus spell on his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to declare Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts to be the winner of the Triwizard Tournament." There was more cheering as the champion, still holding the cup, approached when the Minister motioned him up. Vehosia pulled a sack out of his pocket. "As you know, there is a prize for this event, and it is my honor and privilege to present it to this hardworking young man who has shown us..."

At that moment, the Minister stopped speaking and was looking above the crowd. Everyone followed his gaze to see an eagle owl that seemed to have an injured wing was flying toward, who had recognized it as a Ministry owl. It slowly and awkwardly made its way toward the recipient, who untied the letter after handing the sack of gold to Cedric. "Could the gamekeeper come take this owl and see what's wrong with it," Patricus said as he unrolled the scroll.

As Hagrid made his way up, the Minister muttered a magically amplified, "Oh no." Hagrid silently took the owl and walked off. Patricus then looked at the concerned crowd and took a deep breath. "It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that 'You-Know-Who' has just taken control of the Ministry building, so we are, as of this moment, a government in exile."

Dumbledore, who'd been watching all of this silently, now walked up to Vehosia as he performed a Sonorus charm on himself. "Not quite exiled," he said, "if the Minister will agree, I'd like to offer Hogwarts as the temporary headquarters of the Ministry of Magic."

"I appreciate your offer, Professor Dumbledore, and graciously accept it." He then looked around at the crowd. "Just because You-Know-

Who has taken over a building does not mean he controls the country.”

Someone from the crowd shouted out, “But his has control of the Ministry’s resources, like the Department of Mysteries, Magical Transportation, and...”

“SILENCE!” said Dumbledore, ending the talking that had begun as the scared people began to panic. “You’re right,” said Albus. “We will have to be much more careful, and I’d suggest you stop using detectable means of travel if you believe yourself to be one of Voldemort’s targets.” Most of the crowd shuddered at the name. “However, things could be much worse.”

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The next week was spent with the surviving members of the government making their way to Hogwarts, where the third-floor corridor that had once protected the Philosopher’s Stone was set aside for their use. The term was over, and the students were just waiting around for their grades. Harry thought that the mood of the school had been subdued since the end of the tournament, and he certainly understood why. People were scared, especially when the ‘Howler’ reported all the casualties at the Ministry. About fifty bodies were casually thrown outside. Others were missing, including Percy Weasley and his boss, Dolores Umbridge.

Harry and his friends were very glad to see Arthur Weasley arrive at Hogwarts – they’d been worried about him since the Ministry was attacked. Even though Ron and Ginny had gotten a letter that he was alright, it was still better to see for themselves.

“Luckily, I wasn’t there at the time of the attack. I was chasing down Mundungus Fletcher for selling some jinxed plates to a muggle. By the time I’d gotten back, there were Death Eaters guarding the entrance. Luckily, I saw them before they saw me and apparated home. A lot of good people weren’t as lucky as me.” Arthur hung his head down for a moment in silence before continuing. “I hope Percy’s alright. He hasn’t contacted us. Molly and I immediately removed the Burrow from the Floo Network, and we’ve had special wards put around the house to protect it, should Death Eaters come to call.”

“That’s good,” said Harry, thinking about how his and Sirius’ house had been put under the Fidelius Charm. “My house is warded, too.”

“And my family is staying with Harry and Sirius,” added Hermione. They’d asked the Grangers to stay at Grimmauld Place until the end of the war, knowing that Voldemort now had access to Hermione’s record – including her address. After hearing how bad the situation really was from Sirius, and knowing how Harry and Hermione had been attacked during their first date the previous summer before Voldemort had returned, they agreed and left their dental practice in an associate’s hands. They were already moved into Black Manor. Harry had heard that many other muggle-born families were going into hiding as well.

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The day before they were to leave Hogwarts, Dumbledore sent Harry a message that he wanted to see him, and so Harry found himself knocking on the door of the headmaster’s office.

“Come in, Harry,” said Albus as the door opened. “Good afternoon. Have a seat.”

“Hello, sir.” Harry sat in front of the desk. He had to stop himself from reacting to Dumbledore’s ‘dead’ hand. He still wasn’t used to seeing it.

“Would you like a lemon drop?”

“No, thanks.”

“Very well. We’ll get to the reason I called you here. As you know, Voldemort now has control of the Ministry building.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That gives him many advantages. As you found out on your twelfth birthday, the Ministry can track magic done near underage wizards. They can also trace anyone using the Floo network, although they can’t trace private networks.” He sighed. “It also means that he now has access to all the information that the Ministry contains, including the prophecies in the Department of Mysteries.” Harry had a feeling

that he knew what Dumbledore was about to tell him. “You see, Harry, as you know, a prophecy was made about you before you were born. I’ve tried to keep it a secret so you wouldn’t be burdened with it, but now that Voldemort no doubt has heard it, I believe that it’s time you did, too. It says, ‘*The one...*’

Harry interrupted with a small smirk. “*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.*”

Dumbledore stared at Harry in shock. “How did you know?”

“My dad told Sirius, who told me at the beginning of last summer.”

“I told James not to trust anybody with that information. I thought he’d only told Sirius that the prophecy exists.” He then looked at Harry intently. “Voldemort now knows that you are not guaranteed to kill him, so he will assume that he will be able to beat you.”

“He’s been trying to do that for a long time, anyway,” said Harry, “so I don’t really see the difference.”

“I suppose not. How has your training been going?”

Harry and Dumbledore chatted about the progress Harry and his group had made until they left the office at dinnertime.

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The next day, the students were on the Hogwarts Express heading home. Hermione was reading the latest issue of the *Howler* while Luna was reading the *Quibbler*. Ron was murdering Neville in a game of chess while Ginny was trying to help her boyfriend. Harry was thinking about all the changes that had taken place in the past year. He smiled as he glanced at his girlfriend – he still had trouble believing that he’d been dating Hermione for about a year now. It seemed like only yesterday that he’d admitted his feelings for her.

A lot of bad things had happened this year – Voldemort returning was the cause of it all – but during this whole school year he'd had one thing he could depend on – the brunette sitting next to him with her face buried in a newspaper. He put an arm around her, causing her to look up at him.

"I was just thinking about how lucky I am to have you," he said. "I'd have never made it through this year without you."

She smiled at him as her ears turned pink. "I'm the lucky one." She leaned closer and kissed him.

"Get a room," suggested Ron with a disgusted expression. "We don't want to see you..."

"You should pay attention, Ron," said Ginny with an evil grin. "You might learn a few things from Harry. I'm sure Luna would appreciate it if you stopped acting like an insensitive git all the time."

"I suppose I should pay attention, too," said Neville while Ron glared at his sister.

The redhead looked at her boyfriend. "There's always room for improvement, but I've got no complaints. But if you started acting like Ron..."

At that moment, the door opened, revealing the three stooges – Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Those three Slytherins hadn't given Harry much trouble this year since October, when Harry on one occasion and Ginny on another had totally humiliated them (chapter 25), and consequently, he'd been hoping that he wouldn't have to put up with them on the train. Unfortunately (for them), he was wrong. The only question was how much of his training to reveal. He quickly glanced at Hermione to see she was thinking the same thing. He turned his attention back to the visitors, deciding to use his wand.

"Well, if it isn't the Death Nibblers," he said with a smile. Harry's friends chuckled while the Slytherins glared.

"Laugh all you want, Scar-head. The Dark Lord's gonna display your corpse in the atrium of the Ministry before the summer's over."

Harry faked that he was shocked. "Are you trying to say that Rat-face is after me? I'd have never known it. Thanks for the tip." His expression hardened. "Now get out." He was pointing his wand at Draco now.

With a badly-misplaced arrogance, he sneered at Harry as he reached for his own wand. "I don't think so. I think we'll stay and...Ahhhh!"

At that moment, he was hit with boils from Harry's wand, bat-bogey's from Ginny, a leg-locker curse from Luna, and a tooth-growing curse from Hermione (the same one he'd used on her). He fell over. Crabbe was hit with the full body-bind from Neville while Goyle was spitting out slugs on Draco's head from Ron's hex. They got out of there immediately, with Draco knocking his bodyguards down as he hopped ahead of them. Hermione quickly scourified the mess Goyle had left and turned to the others with a neutral expression on her face. "When will they ever learn?" Everyone burst out laughing.

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Chapter 37 – Summer Studies

“Hello, everyone. It’s good to see so many of you returning to test for a green belt,” said Mr. Tucker. “I’ll call on you alphabetically. After we’ve finished that, anyone who passes is welcome to test for the blue belt as well.”

Among the dozen students wearing a white karate outfit with a purple belt were Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, and Harry Potter. They had thought long and hard about whether they should try returning in disguise or not, and came to the conclusion that it would arouse too much suspicion for them to show up with different hair and eye colors going by different names. They’d be recognized anyway by the people they’d seen every day the previous summer.

Hermione had pointed out that the last place any Death Eater would look for Harry Potter was at a muggle karate school, and Neville had made sure to ask his grandmother not to tell anyone that they were there. One added security measure was that Sirius Black was in the room under Harry’s Invisibility cloak. He was wearing a portkey necklace that went between Black Manor and a secluded spot near the school.

Harry, who’d decided to not wear his glasses during these lessons, told the few fellow students who’d asked that he was wearing contact lenses, which was the truth. In fact, he and Hermione had actually had their prescriptions updated earlier that very day. He anxiously waited for Hermione’s turn, since she would be the first (alphabetically) of them to test. If she passed, then that would mean that they had been following the books properly. He was fairly certain that they were, but he did want confirmation.

“Granger, Hermione,” called Mr. Tucker. She nervously walked up and began the evaluation while Harry watched with his fingers crossed. He couldn’t help but admire how gracefully his girlfriend moved as she demonstrated her mastery of every technique in the green belt handbook. Finally, the instructor said, “Excellent. I can see that you’ve been working very hard this year.”

With her ears turning pink, Hermione answered. "Yes I have. Thank you, sir," as he handed her the new belt, which she pocketed. Harry saw his godfather's faded image wink at him.

Neville was a bit more nervous when his turn came, but all the work he'd put into it showed when the testing began, and he was given the green belt as well. When Harry's turn came, he also received it. All but one of the returning students got the green belt, but only two of them (besides Harry, Hermione and Neville) stayed to attempt the blue belt test.

That one was much more difficult, but all five of the students that took the test did pass. Neville almost fainted when Mr. Tucker gave him the blue belt. Harry and Hermione had told him that he was just as good as them, but he somehow didn't believe it. All three of them would be able to attend the brown belt classes, but already knew that they wouldn't be able to earn that belt until next summer at the earliest. However, all three felt that they would benefit from a few months instruction by a master before going back on their own at Hogwarts. Mr. Tucker would demonstrate everything they'd have to be able to do in order to earn the brown belt.

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"They all did GREAT!" announced Sirius when the quartet arrived in the living room of his house. The Grangers, Dumbledore, Mrs. Longbottom, Lupin, Ginny and Ron were there, ready for a small celebration. "They all got both the green and blue belts." They would've invited a few more people who'd been told the house's location, except that they didn't want to inform anyone else of those three's muggle fighting abilities. They figured that the fewer who knew, the better.

"Congratulations, all of you," said the headmaster. "Fine achievement."

Adam Granger hugged his daughter while Marissa hugged Harry. "Good job!" she said proudly. After the others (including Neville's grandma) finished congratulating the three of them, a cake was brought out that had a moving picture that depicted the last few seconds of the tournament from 'The Karate Kid.' Hermione joked

that it should've been a scene from the movie, 'The Next Karate Kid' that had come out the previous year. Harry whispered to her that it should've been a scene from a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle movie.

After the Longbottoms and Weasleys had left, Dumbledore said, "Harry, would it be alright if I spoke with you alone?"

"Certainly, sir. We can talk in my bedroom."

Harry led him to a room with light brown carpet and light green walls. The queen-size four-poster bed had a dark green blanket over it, with matching bed curtains. There was a wooden desk with a matching chair in there as well.

"What can I do for you, Professor?" asked Harry politely, once he'd closed the door.

"I can see that you've taken your role in the prophecy very seriously, and have worked diligently to prepare. I firmly believe you could pass your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. today if you wanted to, possibly even your N.E.W.T."

Harry's ears turned pink. "Thank you, sir. Hermione's done all the training with me, and would do better on those tests."

"Indeed, she does deserve as much credit as you, possibly more, because she doesn't have a prophecy hanging over her head. My point, though, is that I feel that I should have a hand in your training. Before you can defeat Riddle, there are a few things you must understand, such as why he didn't die when his killing curse at you backfired."

Harry grinned. He truly loved having one-up on the Headmaster. "If this is about the Horcruxes, I already know about them, though I don't know how many are left. I would like to help destroy them, sir."

Dumbledore did his best to not appear shocked, but Potter could tell he was. "Is there anything I've told Mr. Black about that he hasn't repeated to you?"

Although Lupin had actually been the first one to tell Harry about Horcruxes, he saw no reason to get the werewolf in trouble. He grinned. "Not that I'm aware of. He feels that I have the right to know what I'm up against."

"I see," the aged man said. "May I assume that Miss Granger is aware of the Horcruxes as well?"

"Yes, sir."

"I must admit that I, myself, am not certain how many Horcruxes Tom has made. I have a theory, but I wouldn't stake the life of every member of the human race on that theory."

"What is your theory?" asked Harry, curiously.

The headmaster sighed. "I would rather wait until I can confirm my suspicion. I've spent the last year attempting to set an appointment to speak to Tom Riddle's former head of House, whom I believe may have some insight into this matter, but he has continually, what is the expression, brushed me off. I believe it would be prudent to arrive at his location unannounced, perhaps tonight. I believe that you, as well as your godfather, could be most useful during that conversation. I believe that you still sometimes struggle with your temper?" asked Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye.

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Although Harry had wanted to include Hermione as well, Dumbledore insisted that, although she was more than qualified, an extra person would've gotten in the way of that night's endeavor. That seemed to placate her when she was informed of their plans. And so it was that Sirius, Harry and Dumbledore appeared a block away from an old mansion with three small pops.

"It'll be interesting to see old Slughorn again," said Sirius happily.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "This way."

They soon came upon the large gate to what appeared to be a mansion. The headmaster pointed his wand at it, and it swung open.

He continued walking in front of his two companions up the sidewalk until they came to the porch, where Dumbledore stopped.

The door had been blasted off of its hinges and into the house. "Wands at the ready," Albus said calmly as he stepped inside.

The sight that greeted them was not a pleasant one. The room was in shambles. A few end tables were lying on their sides, their contents on the floor. The couch was upside-down. Harry glanced at the large television, to see that its screen was broken. Several small holes were on the blood-stained white walls, as though many spells had hit them.

"Do you think the Death Eaters got him?" asked Harry, clearly worried.

"It certainly appears that way," said Dumbledore as he approached the television.

Sirius sighed. He was clearly upset. "If only we'd gotten here sooner. He was a good bloke."

"Indeed," said Albus, just as he did a very strange thing. He pointed his wand at the tele and performed a spell. It suddenly morphed into a rather bulky old man.

Sirius' face lit up. "Professor Slughorn!" he declared happily while Harry tried to process what he'd seen.

Horace Slughorn didn't pay much attention to Black. Instead, he was looking at Dumbledore. "How did you know it was me?"

"Alas, Horace. I'm afraid that your knowledge of muggle devices is lacking. There was no power button on you, nor was there circuitry inside you. You simply appeared to be a box with a broken window. It most likely would have fooled a Death Eater, though." Harry inwardly chastised himself for not noticing that. He was certain that Hermione would've.

"So, what brings you here, Albus? I recognize Mr. Black, naturally, but who is...Oho! Is this Harry Potter?" He gazed at the Boy-Who-Lived's scar in fascination.

“Yes indeed, Horace. This is Mr. Potter.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” said Slughorn, offering his hand to Harry, who shook it.

“I’m also pleased to see you, again, Sirius. I never believed that rubbish about you betraying Lily and James.”

Sirius shook his former teacher’s hand with a grin, but Harry could see that his godfather didn’t believe that. “It’s good to see you, too, Professor.”

Albus then spoke. “Before we get into the purpose of our meeting you tonight, might I use the loo?”

“Of course. Go down that hallway. It’s the second door on your left.”

“Thank you. The topic we’d like to discuss is Tom Riddle’s Horcruxes. I’ll be right back.”

Horace looked like he was going to pass out. “I don’t know anything about that,” he declared.

Sirius walked up to Slughorn. “Please, sir. All we need to know is how many he made.”

He glared at Padfoot. “If you think I helped him...”

“Oh, no. It’s just that, like so many other students, you were his favorite teacher. I’m sure that you knew him better than anybody else. He might have let something slip.”

Nervously, Horace answered, “I’m afraid not. I...”

“If you know anything at all,” yelled Harry angrily as he finally faced him, “you had better tell us!”

“I d-don’t!” he said shakily.

“Calm down, Harry,” said Sirius nervously before turning back to Slughorn. “He’s been getting more irritable every day since Riddle

came back. I'm afraid that he's ready to lose it. For some reason, he seems to blame you..."

"You've known all along that he would be back and NEVER told anyone!" Harry shouted as some of the discarded furniture began to shake with apparently accidental magic. Horace eyed Harry with apprehension.

"Harry," said Sirius, looking even more nervous than before. Perhaps you should wait outside. Y-you remember what happened last time..."

"That was an accident!" barked Harry as he glared angrily at the former Potions teacher. "We need an answer!"

Looking at Sirius while sweat began to pour down Slughorn's face. "Wh-what happened last time?"

Padfoot closed his eyes solemnly for a moment. "We, we don't like to talk about it. It's just that Harry's a powerful wizard. I mean, you can imagine with what he did while he was just a baby. Anyway, er, sometimes he, temporarily, loses control of his magic, and..."

"Do you WANT Voldemort to live forever!" Harry shouted as he pointed his wand at Horace.

"Harry!" shouted Sirius, trying to get between the angry youth and the now terrified old man. "Professor, please just tell us before..."

"You have vital information and are holding it back! That makes you as bad as a Death Eater!" The tip of Harry's wand was glowing.

"Six!" said Slughorn, with tears falling from his eyes. "He wanted to make six of them, splitting his soul into seven."

"Thank you, Horace," called Dumbledore's voice cheerfully from the hallway. "You've been most cooperative."

Slughorn turned to see Harry grinning. "You, you tricked me."

"Into helping tremendously in the war effort," said Dumbledore. "You'll..."

At that moment, several footsteps were heard from the porch.

"It looks like someone beat us," said a voice.

"No, there'd be a Dark Mark. Let's go in."

A cloaked figure with a mask that resembled a skull stepped into the room. Sirius immediately shot a stunner at him, and the battle began. The Death Eater put up a shield in time, and the red spell ricocheted into the wall. Another enemy stepped inside.

Harry pointed his wand at this one and sent a silent reducto at his wand hand. Unfortunately, the woman moved and shouted, "Avada Kadavra," sending a green light at Harry, who summoned an end table from the floor to intercept it, although some of the wood splinters from it shot into his arm when the piece of furniture burst. Another masked figure entered and Harry managed to disarm him.

Dumbledore sent a golden arc of light at all their attackers that turned into a wall. A red phoenix suddenly appeared. "I believe," said Albus calmly, "That there are both apparition and portkey wards set up in this area. I don't know how many of his followers Tom has sent. I therefore believe that it would be prudent to allow Fawkes to give us a lift. Everyone, grab a tail feather." They all complied, and in a moment, all of them were safely at Black Manor, Slughorn included.

Harry was quite surprised to be immediately pulled into a rib-cracking hug by his girlfriend.

"I, I thought you were in bed," he managed to say.

"I couldn't sleep. I had a...Harry! Your arm is bleeding! What happened?"

"That was not the most pleasant conversation I've ever had," said Slughorn grumpily. "You've lost me my vacation home."

"I'm afraid you can't go back there," said Dumbledore. "I believe that by now they've torched the house."

"What I'd like to know is how they found us!" said Sirius.

“They?” asked Hermione in a worried tone. “You mean Death Eaters, don’t you?”

“I believe that, using the Ministry building’s resources, they must have put a taboo on Riddle’s made up name,” said Dumbledore.

Harry replied, “You mean Volde...”

“Exactly. Now there actually is a reason to fear speaking that anagram. When you mentioned that name, it alerted the Death Eaters, who sent a group to investigate.”

“So now we can’t say the name?” asked Harry as Hermione was using her wand to remove his splinters and heal his cuts.

“Precisely. The wards on this house may prevent them from detecting it here, but I wouldn’t wish to test that theory. I’d suggest referring to him a Riddle from now on.”

“So, what am I going to do?” asked Slughorn.

“I can move you to a safe house,” offered Dumbledore, “as it is my fault that you are in jeopardy. Or, you may go.”

He looked contemplative for a few moments. “No offense, but I believe that I’d rather not be hanging around people directly defying You-Know-Who, so I’ll leave.”

“Very well,” said Albus. “Thank you for your help.”

“Fine. Just don’t spread it around that I told you.”

“Of course.” Slughorn then walked out the door.

Harry then said, “I don’t like the idea that we left that fight.”

“What do you propose we should have done, Harry?” asked Albus. “Stay in that house until they managed to set it on fire?” He looked kindly at his student. “There was no reason to fight that battle – nothing that we needed to protect besides ourselves was there. Besides, if you’d have continued, you would have ended up giving

away your formidable abilities. I believe that you wanted them to be a secret for now.”

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Since they now had a number of Horcruxes to look for, they felt that they at least had a set goal. Since the diary, locket, and ring had been dealt with, they had three more to obtain. Dumbledore showed Harry, Hermione, Sirius and Remus a memory that led them to believe that Hufflepuff's cup would be one of the Horcruxes as well. He also wondered aloud if Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini, might have been turned into a Horcrux. He had no idea what artifact of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's that Riddle could've gotten a hold of to turn into a Horcrux.

“But where are they?” said Harry. “We can debate what they are until we're blue in the face, and it won't help us one bit! We need to know where to look!”

Sirius said, “He does have a point. Where haven't we looked?”

Albus sighed. “His orphanage is no longer standing. I even checked Ollivander's, where he got his wand. I sent another Order member to Albania last year to see if he had one hidden where he spent his exile.”

“Who was that?” asked Lupin.

“I'd rather not say, but you can be assured that he was exceptionally vigilant.”

“What about Hogwarts?” asked Harry.

“I've searched the castle, but of course, even I don't claim to know every secret it holds.”

“Maybe he's left one in the Chamber of Secrets,” suggested Harry.

“That is certainly a possibility, and worth investigating, but I don't believe he had sufficient time to take a trip into the Chamber the last time he was inside the castle.”

“He trusted Malfoy with one,” said Hermione pensively. “Couldn’t he have trusted another Death Eater with one?”

“Perhaps,” Albus said, “But the question is, which one. And where would he or she keep it?”

“At Gringotts,” said Sirius. Everyone looked at him. “At least, that’s where I would. Those top security vaults there are impossible to breach. One of my ancestors tried once.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “Last mistake he ever made. As much as my parents wanted us to join Riddle, they both told us never to try to rob Gringotts – not even for him. A Cruciatus curse is mild compared to what the goblins will do to you. They have the right to deal with thieves in whatever way they see fit.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. “I wonder if Minister Vehosia would be able to persuade the goblins to allow us to search the vaults of known Death Eaters. They know that Riddle will destroy them if he wins the war.”

“Professor,” asked Hermione, “I’m curious. How do you destroy a Horcrux?”

“The two most efficient methods were both available to Harry when he was faced with the diary.”

“Two?” asked Harry. “The basilisk tooth and...” his eyes lit up with understanding. “The sword of Gryffindor.”

“Precisely,” he said.

-

Soon, the routine from the previous summer was back, except that Ron, Luna (Ron asked if she could join) and Neville were participating in the duels. Those three also started studying the subjects that Harry, Hermione and Ginny started the previous year.

Those three had gotten very close to achieving their Animagus forms toward the end of the school year, and were working diligently at that. However, there were hardly any other subjects for them to study.

They still meditated to keep their magical potential as high as it could be and practiced their wandless magic, but weren't learning anything new in those subjects, and didn't take their regular study time for them. They were still studying an advanced charms book and practicing defensive flying once a week. Dumbledore had agreed to tutor them in extremely advanced defense once per week, but that still left them with extra days and nothing to fill their time slot. Once they mastered their Animagus transformations, they'd have another day with nothing to study (not counting their homework, which they did at night).

While Harry and Ginny seemed relieved about this, Hermione seemed unhappy. "Maybe we should sneak into Knockturn Alley to find books to study," she suggested early in the summer.

"I know that we considered that possibility before," said Harry, "but honestly, I think we know everything we need to fight Death Eaters and Riddle himself. We just need to keep practicing to do better. We're still not good at dueling wandlessly. I think we should concentrate on doing spell after spell without a wand every other day during our study time. I want it to become second nature."

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The first defense lesson with Dumbledore started with him individually dueling each of them ten minutes at Black Manor. Each of those duels ended as a standoff because of the short time period. The headmaster had only wanted to evaluate their skill level, and didn't need to duel longer than that to do so.

"Congratulations," he said after the duels, earning confused expressions. "All of you are fighting at auror level, and could certainly defeat any Death Eater in a fair fight."

"A *fair* fight?" Harry repeated, sarcastically.

"You are quite correct that the Death Eaters do not fight fairly, and I believe that none of them have the courage to do that. As a rule, Death Eaters arrive in packs." He looked each one of them in the eye. "All three of you are much more powerful than anyone would expect,

and I can teach you techniques so that each of you can engage five people at once, and together, you could handle twenty-five.”

“How?” asked Hermione, curious as ever.

“You have learned wandless magic to a capacity that ninety-five percent of our population never even dreams of, but I’ve got to take you one step further. Only one spell can be cast through a wand at a time, but without the wand, simultaneous casting of multiple spells is possible.”

Hermione gasped. Ginny whispered, “Two spells at once?” Harry just stared at Albus.

“Yes, two spells at once. At least, to start with. You’ll begin by trying to cast the same spell, in this case, a stunner, out of both hands at the same time.” He then conjured six practice dummies for them to aim at (two for each).

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When Dumbledore left, all three of them were exhausted, and none had achieved their goal. They’d cast spells a second apart, but not at the same time. He told them that it usually does take a few weeks to get the hang of it, and told them to keep practicing. They added that to the list of what they needed to do.

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A few days later, during their Animagus session, three excited animals could be found in the dueling room. A lion with big emerald eyes, a wild black mane and lightning-shaped scar on his forehead was walking next to a dark brown cat with brown eyes. A red robin was flying around the room above them. They had finally achieved their transformations.

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Chapter 38 – Soul Searching

“Congratulations!” said Sirius happily. “Now, we’re going to have to name you three new Marauders. What do you think we should call them, Moony?”

Remus Lupin looked at each of the three Animagi before him, finally focusing on the robin that was still flying around the room. “Well, Padfoot, I’d suggest calling this one Redwing – Wings for short.”

Ginny sang a few notes of birdsong in reply before changing back into a human. “I like it. What about Hermione?”

“Hm,” said Padfoot, looking at the dark brown cat. “How about Miss Kitty?” The cat growled at him, showing her teeth. “Alright, settle down. You don’t like it. Then how ‘bout Catwoman?” Hermione hissed angrily and scratched Sirius’ leg as he chuckled. “Ouch! That hurt.”

Ginny giggled, “How about Claws?”

Hermione purred and changed back. “Alright. That’s acceptable. I think Harry should be called Scar.” Harry roared his disagreement, quite loudly. “Fine,” she said, petting his mane.

Sirius said, “Lions are supposed to be the kings of the jungle, so how about Kingly?” Harry shook his head.

“Too much like Kingsley,” said Remus. “How about Fangs?” Harry nodded his head and changed back.

Sirius cleared his throat and said solemnly, “I hearby dub thee Redwing, Claws, and Fangs – the newest members of the distinguished Fellowship of Marauders,” tapping each on the head with his wand as he said their new name.

Ron, Neville, and Luna, who’d been silently watching, applauded. Luna commented, “Now the wrackspurts won’t be able to affect you.”

It took a lot of hard work, using the open slots on their study schedules, but on Friday, July 28th, Harry managed to send two silent reducto's at once – one from each hand – effectively breaking the two practice dummies he'd been using. He wiped the sweat from his forehead while sighing with relief that he'd finally done it.

“Good job, Harry,” said Hermione, sounding a bit less enthusiastic than Harry would've predicted. “You did it first.” Now, Harry knew the problem.

“I'm sure you'll get it soon,” he said with what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “You, too, Redwing.”

Taking a deep breath, Ginny said, “I hope so.”

Refocusing on the busted dummies, Harry thought, “Repairo!” and both of them fixed themselves.

He continued breaking and fixing them for the next hour, until Hermione announced, “I did it!”

Harry hugged her with a smile on his face. “I knew you could do it.” He then gave her a quick kiss. “Now, fix them,” he said as he went back to his practice. Fifteen minutes later, Ginny managed it as well, although Harry noticed that her dummies weren't broken as badly as his and Hermione's. He wisely decided not to mention that, instead congratulating her for a job well done. *‘Besides,’ he thought, ‘the power she can put into the spells will increase with practice. Not to mention that her magical core is a year in development behind mine simply because of her age. She's much more powerful than I was last year.’*

-

Dumbledore was very pleased with their progress on his visit the next day. “I can honestly say that I've never seen anyone your ages with as much magical ability as you three. Miss Weasley, you are the youngest Animagi I have ever heard of. Miss Granger, you are the most formidable witch under forty that I've ever known, both in intellect and magical skills. Mr. Potter, the progress you've made this past year is phenomenal. I believe that you are nearly ready to fulfill

your destiny.” For a moment, Dumbledore seemed sad, but quickly smiled with a twinkle in his eye. “I would like to completely test your dueling ability, Harry. At ten o’clock sharp tomorrow morning, I’d like to duel you with no limits except to not use unforgivables.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Er, I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“Nonsense,” replied Dumbledore calmly. “You’re too modest. And besides, if you plan on dueling Riddle, you need to practice against someone of similar abilities, and I’m the closest person to an equal that is available. Good day to you all.” He then left Number Twelve Grimmauld Place without another word.

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Harry spent the rest of that day nervously practicing every spell and dueling technique he knew, while contemplating running away.

“Fangs,” said Sirius after Harry beat him in a duel for the third time in an hour. “You’re nervous about nothing. Dumbledore won’t kill you.”

Panting, Harry nodded. “I suppose not.”

“The worst he’ll do is break a few bones. Maybe cut you or burn you with that fire whip of his. Maybe maim you...”

“You’re not helping, Padfoot,” interrupted Harry, who was smiling a bit.

“Maybe you should spend some time with Hermione,” he suggested. “You know, get one last snog in before...”

“Shut up, Sirius,” he said, actually chuckling as he walked toward the door.

After his girlfriend helped him forget about the upcoming duel, Harry went to bed much more relaxed.

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On Sunday, July 30th, Harry was waiting in the dueling room with Hermione at 9:45 a.m. Everyone else left him alone with her for a few

minutes. He'd hardly touched his breakfast, and had done enough of his exercises to warm up, but not exhaust himself. He was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, shorts, and trainers. He figured that they wouldn't be using armor in this duel. It was supposed to test his abilities – not the abilities of dragon hide.

"Don't be so nervous, Harry," said Hermione.

"Easy for you to say," he shot back. Upon seeing her frown, he quickly said, "I'm sorry."

She smiled. "I know you're under stress, but I believe that you'll do better than you think."

"Do you think I'll win?" he asked. His girlfriend shifted uncomfortably on the floor, answering his question with her body language.

"I don't think he'll hurt you too badly," she offered. "Just surrender when you know you're beaten."

He actually laughed. "Thanks a lot."

"Anytime," she said. She then kissed him. "You'll do fine. I know you'll get him a few times, anyway." She then giggled. "How many students have wished they could take a shot at the headmaster over the years?"

He laughed. "You will help me recover, won't you?"

"Of course, Fangs."

"Then it won't be so bad, I suppose."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and Sirius' voice said, "Dumbledore's here."

After taking a deep breath, Harry said, "Come on in. Let's get this over with. I hope I don't have to spend my birthday in Saint Mungo's."

"I have the same concern," said Dumbledore as he strode in. He was wearing long, purple robes, which greatly contrasted with Harry's

outfit. "I have no wish to use their services as well. That is why I've asked Madam Pomfrey to be here."

It was soon decided that Remus would referee, and an invisible barrier was created to protect the spectators. Before the match began, Dumbledore said, "I want to make sure you fully understand, Harry. Don't hold anything back. I won't."

Harry gulped and nodded. Remus said, "The match is over when one of you either surrenders or is knocked unconscious, since neither of you can be disarmed by simply losing your wand. Take your positions." The two duelers took defensive stances. "Begin."

While pointing his wand at Dumbledore with his right hand, Harry shot a stunner out of both the end of his wand and his left hand, and then he dropped to the floor just in time to dodge a red spell that had been sent his way. He saw that Albus had shielded against both of his *stupefies* and was standing in the same spot he'd started at. Harry rolled and stood while shooting a blasting hex to keep his opponent on the defensive.

Dumbledore conjured a flock of twenty bats in the air and sent them at Harry, who formed a shield between himself and the bats. That momentary distraction allowed the headmaster to send a fire whip at Harry. It broke the invisible shield, allowing the bats access to Harry, and at the same time hit his wand, which the fifteen-year-old dropped a moment before sending a fireball out of each hand – one aimed at his opponent, the other at the closest bats, eliminating nine of them.

Dumbledore disappeared to avoid the fireball, and reappeared behind Harry, whose karate instincts kicked in. The old man couldn't tell what his protégé had done, but he felt his legs give out and fell to the ground. People started clapping at that moment, while Harry shot two stunners at Albus. With surprising speed for a man his age, Dumbledore rolled out of the way, and shot a tripping hex at the Boy-Who-Lived.

The hex hit Harry, who fell, but managed to roll out of the way before the headmaster's next hexes could hit him. With both of his hands together, he shot two blasting hexes straight at Dumbledore's chest. He conjured a shield in time, but part of the blast made it through and

hit its target, pushing him backward five feet, but not knocking him to the ground. The old man was gasping for air, and his complexion was getting a bit pink. Harry sent another hex at him, but he apparated away again.

This time, Harry decided that two could play at this game. He apparated to where Dumbledore had been standing, aimed his hands where he'd been before, and shot two powerful stunners. Harry's guess had been right. The headmaster had once again apparated right behind his foe, but found that his foe had moved. He produced a shield just in time to block the stunners.

Dumbledore then began shooting hex after hex at his opponent in rapid succession, causing Harry to keep dodging without a moment to shoot back. After thirty seconds of dodging successfully, he made the mistake of jumping out of the way and saw that a hex was headed right where he'd land. He knew that it's impossible to apparate while in motion without splinching yourself, so he would get hit. He put up his best shield, hoping it would hold and landed.

The bone-breaker hex was weakened by Harry's shield, but did hit his left ankle, causing a lot of pain. Harry shot two bone-breaker hexes back at the headmaster in vengeance as he fell to the floor. The headmaster looked surprised to see those hexes and conjured a shield, which was destroyed by the hexes hitting it together. A weakened version of the hex hit his right arm, causing the man to scream in agony as it broke.

Harry took the moment of distraction to perform a healing spell on his ankle, but could tell it was still sore. However, at least he could stand up, even if he had a limp. He began rapidly firing stunners at his opponent, determined to end this duel before any other bones got broken.

Dumbledore raised another shield and began doing the same thing his opponent was doing, sending as many stunners as he could. Dumbledore's shield was taking a beating, and at the same time, Harry wasn't moving as fast as before, especially because the remaining conjured bats had finally caught up with him. The headmaster's shield was penetrated at the same moment that Harry

wasn't fast enough to dodge. Consequently, they both got hit by stunners at the same time.

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Harry opened up his eyes, and saw the face of his girlfriend. "How do you feel?" she asked.

He shook his head in an effort to wake himself up more as he thought about it. He didn't feel any injuries, and could see Madam Pomfrey dealing with Dumbledore. "I'm fine. I guess I lost. Not much of a surprise."

"You didn't lose, Harry," she said bemusedly.

"I was knocked out."

"So was he," she said with a smirk. "You both fell at the same moment. It was a draw."

Harry's eyes widened as he stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

"Technically, he was hurt worse than you."

"He must've been holding back."

"Ah, Harry, my boy," called Dumbledore from where he was. "You did very well. The only thing I held back on was the use of lethal spells. I did not wish to kill you. I know that you did the same. As long as you don't hold back lethal spells when facing Riddle, I believe that you will have an equal chance of besting him in a duel."

Harry was shocked. "You believe I'm as good as Vold..."

"Harry! Remember that his name is taboo. Saying it could reveal our location." He sighed. "I wish the Ministry had put a taboo on the Unforgivables. I wish I'd thought to suggest it to Minister Vehosia." He then looked back at Harry. "I know that Tom has much more experience than you, and knows a lot more curses than you, but your power is about equal, and it doesn't take a thousand spells to end a duel – just one. You also have the advantage of youth and agility. If

you can dodge his spells, it doesn't matter what he tries to hit you with. I was pleased that you didn't depend much on shields, because I doubt that any spell Riddle sends at you will be blocked by a simple *protego*."

"So, you're saying that as soon as the Horcruxes are gone, I'll be ready?"

Dumbledore's face held a smile that did not quite reach his eyes when he said, "Exactly. On that front, something that may help us has occurred. It seems that a Death Eater murdered a goblin at Gringotts when he was taking too long to wait on him. While that death is most regrettable, this has the Goblin nation very upset, and more predisposed to grant our request. I have a meeting with Minister Vehosia later today, where I'll ask him to request that the goblins allow us to search known Death Eater vaults for Dark objects. Hopefully, we'll be able to find a Horcrux."

They all wished Albus good luck before he left.

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The next day, Harry woke up early with anticipation. It was his fifteenth birthday, and for the first time in his life, he was actually expecting a celebration, along with gifts. It was true that he'd gotten them before since he'd joined the wizarding world, but it had always been a surprise to him. This time, he actually did expect his birthday to be recognized. He was having a party that wasn't a surprise. Despite that fact, he still had to do his training.

He threw on his exercise clothes and walked down to the training room, finding that Hermione was already there. She walked up to him and gave him a kiss.

"Happy birthday."

"It is now," he said before kissing her.

A throat was cleared behind them. Harry didn't respond, but Hermione separated from him. He reluctantly turned to see Sirius. "Happy birthday, Cub."

“Thanks.”

Ginny, Neville, Luna and Ron showed up a few minutes later to join in the exercise, each wishing him a happy birthday, although Luna added, “Make sure the yeltines don’t bite you. They like to bite people on their birthdays.”

After an hour of that, the teenagers separated into two trios for their studying (Harry, Hermione and Ginny in one group with Ron, Luna and Neville in the other) based on the topics they were covering. On this day, Harry’s group was continuing to practice nonverbally and wandlessly casting more than one spell at once. They all could do it, but wanted to make it second nature so that they could try more than two at once. The other group was learning advanced defensive magic.

After that hour was over, they began their duel. Since Harry needed to be best, he wanted the odds as bad as possible. Currently, it was Harry and Hermione dueling Sirius, Ginny, Neville, Ron and Luna.

At first, the outnumbered couple stood back-to-back as they each cast spell after spell, keeping the others on the defensive. However, the other team soon realized that they could pair off, with one shielding while the other kept firing offensive spells. Soon, Harry and Hermione were separated as they dodged away from curses that never seemed to stop coming. Whenever they got a chance, they fired spells that could penetrate shields, but they had to keep moving so fast that they would be dodging someone else’s spell before they could stun the person. They’d have a new shield up before they were shot at again.

Harry got sick of this and shot a spell at the floor beneath Luna. He’d learned about it in an advanced transfiguration lesson, and had been surprised Dumbledore hadn’t done it to him. The floor beneath the blonde girl’s feet moved up into a speed bump, effectively tripping the girl. Harry stunned her. In this practice, stunned combatants couldn’t be revived, otherwise they’d have to use lethal spells to decide a winner. If Harry had been fighting a Death Eater, he’d have probably used a *reducto*.

At the same moment, he heard Ron swear. He quickly glanced to see his first friend lying on the floor without a wand, in the process of

being stunned. Harry had to quickly duck to avoid a stunner from Sirius, and mentally berated himself for getting distracted. "You take Sirius," shouted Hermione. "I've got Ginny."

"At least you think you have," said Ginny while Harry shot two curses at his godfather. He didn't watch the two girls' battle as Padfoot changed into a dog, with the spells flying over him. The grim jumped toward Harry, who jumped at Sirius changing into a lion, so that they both were animals when they rammed into each other. They both roared, distracting Ginny for one second, during which she was stunned.

Hermione watched the cat and dog wrestling on the ground, and wondered if she should interfere. She didn't want to risk stunning Harry by accident, and that went for any other spell she could try. She decided to just watch. She believed that Harry would win, but if he didn't, she'd hex Padfoot, so their team would win anyway. She thought that it wasn't very smart of Harry to change forms, but wasn't sure that she wouldn't have, under those circumstances. The huge dog and lion were almost evenly matched, and the dog had a lot more experience fighting in that form. All three of the 'New Marauders' were just getting used to moving in their forms.

Just when Hermione thought that Padfoot might get the best of Fangs, a red light shot out of the lion's front right claw straight into the dog's chest. He fell, stunned. Harry changed back into a human, and was panting. Hermione could see a few scratches on her boyfriend's face, so she quickly healed him before walking to each opponent and, "Enervate"-ing them. She then turned to Harry. "How did you perform a spell in your Animagus form?"

"He what?" asked Ginny, while the other boys stared at Harry.

"That's supposed to be impossible," Hermione continued.

Harry looked nervous. "I don't know. I just wished I could stun him, and I did. It didn't feel any different than when I use magic as a human."

"Hm," said Sirius, while scratching his chin. "I would guess that most, if not all, of the people who become Animagi only do magic with their

wands. If that's the case, then they probably can't hold a wand in their forms, unless they're some sort of monkey."

Hermione's face brightened. "So, since we don't need our wands to perform spells, using just our bodies as magical conduits, we can use magic. I've got to test this!" she declared before changing into a cat. The feline pointed a paw at her boyfriend, and a beam of light shot him. He immediately began laughing uncontrollably, under the influence of the *cheering charm*. Soon, Redwing was shooting spells out of her wings in midair, with the small problems that she'd start to fall when she stopped flapping her wings to shoot a spell, and then her aim was off.

Sirius looked thoughtful for a moment before suggesting, "Shoot the spells out of your feet." The robin tried it, and hit her brother with a stinging hex.

"Ouch! What'd you do that for?"

"Because I could," she said happily after changing form.

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All too soon, Harry, Hermione and Neville had to leave for their karate lesson, which left the others the chance to set up for the party. By the time they returned, the decorations were all set up, and the party would start an hour after they returned, which gave them plenty of time to clean up. Harry wasn't allowed to see the decorations yet.

After Harry showered in his bathroom, he put on the animated 'Heart of a Seeker' t-shirt that Ginny had given him at his party the year before. Finding that it was a bit tight around the chest and shoulders, he quickly performed a spell to enlarge it a bit and looked in the mirror, and noticed that the Snitch was moving very slowly. He closed his eyes and focused and sending some of his magic to replenish the spells on his t-shirt. He opened his eyes and admired how the picture of a Snitch began zooming around until it was caught by a hand coming from his heart.

When he walked down the stairs, he found that most of the guests, including the Weasley family sans Percy, had arrived. Naturally,

Sirius and all the Grangers, who were living at that house, were there. Luna, Neville, Remus, Tonks and Hagrid were there as well. Dumbledore and McGonagall had said they'd be there, but hadn't shown up yet. Harry could see a table full of wrapped packages in one corner of the room

"You wore the shirt I gave you last year!" said a beaming Ginny, who walked up and gave Harry a hug. "Happy birthday!"

Hermione walked up to her boyfriend and gave him a quick kiss. "Happy birthday, Harry."

While the others were wishing Harry a happy birthday, both McGonagall and Dumbledore came in through the floo.

"Happy birthday, Harry," his head of house said as she placed a present on the table.

"Yes, I do hope you're having a joyful birthday," said Albus jovially. "I would like a private word with you before this celebration begins." He then placed a small package on the gift table.

"Of course, sir." The two of them walked to Harry's bedroom, where Dumbledore closed the door and cast some privacy charms.

"I wanted to inform you that Minister Vehosia was able to get us permission from the Goblins to visit the vaults of known Death Eaters. They are angry enough with that organization to unofficially take sides. We will be able to inspect the contents and destroy cursed objects, but not remove anything from the vaults." He then sighed. "Alas, we have also agreed to give the Sword of Gryffindor to the goblins by the end of the year, and Minister Vehosia didn't wish to discuss what other concessions he made to the Goblin nation. I shall, of course, be bringing that wonderful sword with me, and the Minister made it clear that it is necessary to destroy certain dark objects.

"Therefore, tomorrow, you, Hermione, Ginny, Sirius and I will be visiting Gringotts. You and Hermione will be under your Invisibility cloaks while I will also be invisible. Sirius will claim that he's going to visit his family vault with the goblin Griphook. We will all follow, and once we're in the cart, we'll reveal ourselves and visit the highest

security vaults belonging to Death Eaters. That is the Malfoy, Carrow, Lestrangle, Avery and Dolohov vaults. I find it highly unlikely that Tom would trust a Horcrux to be in any less secure vault than that. There is a dragon guarding each of them, but fortunately the goblins will be restraining them.”

“That’s good, but why can’t Neville, Luna, and Ron come too? They are training, too. Maybe not for as long, but this shouldn’t be too dangerous if the goblins are helping us.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. “I’m not sure...”

“It sounds like a bunch of busy work if we have to check every item, so I think that the more people we have helping, the better. We’ll all be wearing dragon armor.”

“Yes, I believe you’re right. I shall also invite Remus. I shall speak to the adults, and leave the teenagers to you. Be ready at 2 o’clock sharp. That should give you time to return from your karate school. We’ll try to finish up by 8 p.m., but will be allowed to spend the night there if necessary. That is, all but Sirius, who will have to be seen returning to avoid raising suspicions.”

“Alright,” agreed Harry, and they both returned to the party. They all had a good time. Mrs. Weasley used the same charm she had the previous year to put a picture of Harry catching the Snitch on his cake. Harry received various books from many people, another t-shirt from Ginny that showed a dragon flying around, and a pocket-sized foe glass from Dumbledore that he was encouraged to keep with him at all times, along with a new Sneakoscope from Sirius. Hermione gave him a bottle of the same cologne she’d bought him the previous year. Her parents gave him a collection of classic English literature that contained twelve famous books.

Harry wanted to ride Sirius’ motorcycle to the Dursleys to dung-bomb the house again, but Sirius was sorry to say that, “With Riddle out there, we can’t risk trips like that. I will be taking you and Hermione to my island before the summer’s out, though.” That seemed to satisfy Harry for the moment, although he did decide to prank Privet Drive once the war was over.

Most of the guests (with the exceptions of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Molly) participated in a game of indoor Quidditch (which didn't use brooms). Adam Granger and Arthur Weasley particularly enjoyed it. Marissa Granger was referee. McGonagall and the others did enjoy watching it. After the match, Harry got the chance to let the other teenagers know to be ready to visit Gringotts the next day.

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At precisely 2:05 p.m., a rather large group of people arrived by portkey behind Gringotts. Albus Dumbledore quickly became invisible while Harry, Ron and Neville crowded under his Invisibility cloak. Hermione, Ginny and Luna huddled under hers. Remus Lupin disillusioned himself. They all made their way toward the entrance of the bank, with the teenage boys walking the slowest because Ron was getting too tall to fit under the cloak.

They made it to the entrance just in time to see Sirius Black walk into the bank. He'd arrived very publicly, and the others waited for the next customer opening the door to get inside. The others made their way into the bank just in time to follow Padfoot and Griphook through the door that led to the carts. Once they were all in the now crowded cart, Dumbledore and the others became visible. Harry and Hermione stuffed their cloaks into their pockets.

Griphook quickly began the trip before speaking. "I was not informed that so many of you would be joining us on this journey."

"We realized that the mission would go much more quickly with more people helping," said Dumbledore. "You can trust every one of them."

"Very well." They sped through the caverns in silence, until finally it stopped near a blind dragon. "This is the first vault on your list – the Malfoy vault. Remember, you are not to take anything outside of this vault."

"Of course not," said Dumbledore amicably. "We are not here to steal, only to prevent further deaths."

Griphook opened the vault, and Harry had to admit that there were a lot of gold and beautiful treasures inside it. Dumbledore said, "He

wouldn't have cursed a random Galleon, so just test all the objects without touching them."

Hermione had taught Ron, Neville and Luna the detection spell that she, Harry and Ginny had used the previous year while cleaning out Black Manor, so they all separated and began working. Harry tested a few trophies, an Order of Merlin, antique clocks that had obvious muggle origins, jars with shrunken heads in them, and many objects he couldn't identify. Every now and then, he'd find something that had a dark curse on it, and destroy it with a spell Dumbledore had shown them. While their primary objective was to find a Horcrux, there was nothing wrong with destroying a few other cursed items.

After an hour, they were finished, twenty dark artifacts were destroyed, but none of them were Horcruxes. Harry hadn't thought Voldemort would've given Malfoy two of them to protect. They then went to the Carrow vault with the same results, except that it was thirty cursed items.

They walked into the Lestrangle vault, and found it crammed from floor to ceiling with golden coins and goblets, silver armor, the skins of strange creatures – some with long spines, others with drooping wings – potions in jeweled flasks, and a skull still wearing a crown.

After less than a minute of scanning objects without touching them, Dumbledore announced, "It is here!" Harry turned to see that Dumbledore was pointing his wand at what was unmistakably Hufflepuff's cup. After a few seconds, he added, "They have added Gemino and Flagrante Curses. It is quite fortunate that we haven't been touching anything." He then performed a spell on the cup, presumably to remove the curses, and said, "I want you all to stand back."

He then pulled the Sword of Gryffindor out of a tiny pouch he'd carried. It still seemed funny to Harry to watch something that big come out of that small of a container, even though he owned a trunk with similar properties.

"May I do it?" asked Ginny, surprising everyone. "I'd really like to destroy a Horcrux." Harry realized that this was because of her experience with the diary.

Apparently, Dumbledore realized it, too, because he handed her the sword. "Of course, Miss Weasley."

He watched in silence as Ginny raised the sword in her arms and chopped the cup with all her might. There was a clang of metal, and a long, drawn-out scream. The cup had been cleaved in two, right down the middle. The redhead returned the Sword of Gryffindor to the headmaster.

Dumbledore moved the two pieces of the broken heirloom around and performed a sticking charm. The end result was that at first glance, the cup looked undamaged. "Very well. I believe that we shall leave the rest of this vault untouched." He then put the protections back on the cup. "Hopefully, no one will be able to tell that we were ever here," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

They checked out the vaults of Avery and Dolohov, and got similar results to the Malfoy and Carrow vaults, and were back at Black manor by 7 p.m. to celebrate the destruction of another Horcrux. Bolstered by their success, they agreed to search the Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts that Saturday.

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It was a filthy and disappointed group of people that flew up into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom on broomsticks at 2 p.m. that Saturday. They'd been down there since 8:30, and had searched every inch of the legendary chamber and found nothing but a rotting basilisk corpse and a lot of rodent bones. Dumbledore did, however, magically extract the basilisk's fangs, which would be very useful if they had to turn over Gryffindor's Sword to the goblins before they destroyed all the Horcruxes.

Neville had held Ginny's hand through the entire ordeal. At first, she'd been shaking, but after an hour she'd been able to help search. After following the tunnel behind Slytherin's mouth, they only found more rodent bones. It was really quite unpleasant, and the air smelled awful. Even after the air had been cleaned by a spell it still didn't seem right. They were glad to be out of there, but wished they hadn't gone.

"I suppose I should have known," said Dumbledore as he scourged himself. I'd monitored Riddle's movements during his visit, and he didn't make his way anywhere near here. I had thought he might have hidden one down there while he was still a student."

"Where did he go?" asked Harry.

"Straight to the seventh floor, where the entrance to my office is."

"There are a lot of other places on the seventh floor," said Hermione. "The entrance to Gryffindor Tower, for example."

"I doubt he hid a Horcrux in our common room," said Ron, earning a glare from Hermione.

"Maybe not," said Harry, "but there's also the Divination classroom."

"He didn't go that direction," said Albus.

"Isn't Flitwick's office there?" asked Sirius.

"Yes," said the headmaster, but I doubt that he'd have hidden a Horcrux in the Ravenclaw head's office.

"There's got to be something else," said Ginny. Looking around, she said, "Is there a loo up there that might have another hidden chamber?"

"Not in the boy's restroom," said Harry. "Ever since I came down here the first time, I always check the sinks for anything weird."

"Me, too," admitted Ginny quietly.

"There may be something," said Dumbledore, deep in thought. "Last Christmas, I found an excellent restroom near the entrance to my office when my bladder was exceptionally full. Later that day, I investigated it, and couldn't relocate it."

Harry blinked to get the image of Dumbledore's full bladder out of his mind. "So, this room appeared out of nowhere and disappeared?"

“Exactly,” replied the headmaster. “I investigated further, eventually enlisting the aid of a house elf. You see, they seem to know more about Hogwarts than anyone else. Anyway, she explained to me that it is called the Room of Requirement and will come and go at the user’s need. If Tom Riddle had discovered the room during his stay at Hogwarts, he may have hidden a Horcrux there.

“Sounds like we should check that out,” said Sirius.

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Before long, the group was standing in front of the painting of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls to dance. Dumbledore had explained how to activate the room, so Harry was pacing back and forth, thinking, *‘I need a place to hide my Horcrux...I need a place to hide my Horcrux.’*

A door suddenly appeared, so they opened it to find a room the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. He gasped, and found that he wasn’t the only one. The others were looking around in amazement. Hermione unsuccessfully tried to summon a Horcrux, but Dumbledore pointed out that Riddle wouldn’t have made it that easy, so they split up and began checking every item for a curse.

While Hermione decided to check a group of books, defending her decision by declaring that, “The first Horcrux was a book,” Harry chose a corridor that contained broken furniture, winged catapults, Fanged Frisbees, and chipped bottles with old potions. He checked every single thing and moved further down. Then he checked a bunch of hats, one of which did have a mildly dark curse, so he destroyed it, but knew it wasn’t the Horcrux. He looked through jewels, a few of which had other curses on them, which he eliminated. He went through a bunch of old cloaks, and then saw what appeared to be broken dragon eggs. He found a bunch of corked bottles full of poisons he recognized from his extra studies and vanished them before coming across rusted swords and a bloodstained axe. After he

checked a huge stuffed troll, he noticed a tarnished tiara, so he cast the dark detector spell on it.

It definitely had a powerful enough dark spell on it to be a Horcrux. Harry was afraid to touch it, because there could be jinxes on it. "Professor Dumbledore!" he called out, "I think I found it!"

"Where are you?" came Albus' voice. "Would you be so kind as to shoot up red sparks please, so that I can find you?"

Within a few minutes, the headmaster had found Harry, and was running his own spells on the diadem. With a twinkle in his eyes, he declared, "You have indeed located a Horcrux, and I believe that this is the lost diadem of Ravenclaw, said to bestow wisdom upon the wearer." He was clearly in awe of the priceless artifact. "I wonder how Tom ever located this." He sighed. "It seems such a pity to destroy it, but what must be done must be done." He pulled out the Sword of Gryffindor and looked at Harry. "Would you do the honors? I'm afraid I cannot bring myself to destroy it."

"Okay," he said, grasping the sword in his hand and chopping the precious relic in two. After they heard a loud scream coming from the tiara, Harry said, "Do you think you can fix it? Y'know, to put it in a museum or something after the war?"

Albus smiled down at the young man. "Alas, it can't actually be repaired, but I can stick the two halves together like I did Hufflepuff's cup. It won't look that bad in a case. It certainly won't bestow wisdom anymore." He then frowned. "If Riddle would've put this on, he may have realized that what he was doing was wrong. In any case, we've already been in here for an hour and a half. It's time we left."

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When they returned to Black Manor, after asking Dobby and Winky to leave the room so they could have some privacy, Dumbledore told them, "I believe that the sixth Horcrux is Riddle's snake, and that she is usually at her master's side. Therefore, I don't believe we'll be able to reach her until we face him."

“So that’s it,” said Harry happily. “We make sure to kill his snake and then I duel him.”

With a sorrowful look on his face, the headmaster shook his head. “Not quite.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

Looking sadly at Harry, Albus said, “Do you remember in your second year, when I told you that Riddle had accidentally put a bit of himself in you?”

“Yea...oh NO! NO! You are not saying that...” Harry backed up with a look of horror on his face.

Closing his eyes, Dumbledore nodded his head. “I’m afraid that when he attacked you as a baby, his soul was so torn apart that a fragment of it was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing building. You. That is why you speak Parseltongue. That is why you have your connection to him. I’m sorry not to have let you know earlier, but I couldn’t bear to. I’d detected the Horcrux when I examined you after your parents died.”

While backing up further still, Harry found he was trembling slightly as his face paled.

“No,” said Hermione as tears began to form in her eyes. “You can’t mean that Harry has to...You can’t!”

That was all Harry could take. He turned around and bolted to his bedroom, magically sealing and silencing the door behind him. He collapsed on the bed, not caring that tears had begun falling from his eyes. “To think, he muttered as his throat constricted as his jaw trembled. “I actually thought I might live through this.” He stayed like that all night, still in his clothes, until sleep finally claimed him several hours later.

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The next day, Harry didn’t show up for morning exercise. Hermione wasn’t positive that it was deliberate. He could have simply overslept,

but she doubted it. She and the others went through their routine without once mentioning the fact that he was missing, as none of them knew how they would handle being told that they were a Horcrux that needed to be destroyed.

Hermione had followed after Harry the night before, only to find that she was too late to stop him from locking himself away. She thought about camping outside his room all night, but figured it was pointless. She cast a charm on the door to inform her the moment it opened and walked back to the living room. It looked like a funeral. Dumbledore was already gone, and the other teenagers looked about to leave as well. They all looked at her expectantly. "He's locked and silenced his door," she said sadly. Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna, who surprisingly didn't have anything to say about Nargles or some other nonexistent creature, portkeyed away.

Hermione was in the middle of some particularly painful stretches when her wand vibrated to let her know her boyfriend had opened his door. She stopped and got up, running out of the room without a word.

She arrived at his door just in time to hear a flush from the nearby bathroom. She smiled briefly, realizing why he'd left his room. No matter how miserable you are, there are some things you can't ignore. Deciding what to do quickly, she slipped into his room, leaving the door exactly as it had been, and hid.

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The door opened and Harry entered his room, quickly renewing the charms. Hermione gasped as she took in his appearance. His eyes were bloodshot. His complexion was full of pink patches. There were tear stains running down his cheeks. He even had some whiskers on his face. His clothes were wrinkled and his hair was messier than usual.

"Who's here?" he demanded, pointing his hand in his intruder's direction.

She stood up. "It's me, Harry. I wanted to see you."

"You have," he said indifferently, "Now you can report that I'm alive."

“Harry?”

“Go on,” he said, gesturing toward the door, which glowed for a moment and then opened.

She pointed her own hand at the door, which closed and glowed again.

“Get out!” he hissed. “I already know why you want to talk. I understand. I wouldn’t want to date me either.”

“What?” she asked, confused.

“You want to break up. I understand. I wouldn’t want to snog a Horcrux either. Now go.” He pointed at the door, which glowed for a moment and opened.

“Stop it!” she yelled, magically slamming the door. “I’m NOT leaving, and I didn’t come here to break up with you!”

“Oh. I get it,” he said evenly. “You always were too kind. You’ll endure it so that I enjoy my last few...”

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” she yelled.

He looked at her in shock. “Didn’t you hear? I’ve got a bloody Horcrux inside me! That’s what’s wrong! I’m a freak! A freak with a death sentence!”

“You are not a freak!” she shouted, as she began to cry. “You’re a wonderful, caring man who...”

“Who just happens to have a piece of a murderer’s soul inside me that helped keep him alive!”

“He’s got some of my blood inside him!” she reminded him. “How do you think I feel knowing I helped him get a body?”

He seemed taken aback for a moment as he sat on his bed, but then retorted, “At least you don’t have to die,” but said it with less venom.

She walked up and sat next to him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "We'll find a way," she said, hoping against hope that she was right.

He turned to look at her with a sad expression. "If Dumbledore doesn't know how, then no one does. Face it. I'm gonna die." He took a deep breath. "My biggest regret is that I'll never get to marry you," he said as a few tears began to fall. "I love you."

She embraced him as her tears joined his. "I'll love you forever."

-

They both missed their study session, but Hermione showed up for the dueling while Harry cleaned up. He came downstairs for lunch and sat next to Hermione, who kissed him quickly.

"Hi, Harry," said Ginny guardedly.

"Hi. Sorry I missed exercise, everybody."

"That's okay," said Sirius with a fake smile. "Everyone deserves a break, sometimes."

"I suppose this is what it's like to find out a friend has a fatal disease," said Luna, being painfully honest.

Harry shrugged. "I, I suppose."

"What is you meaning that someone has a fatal disease?" asked Dobby, who'd been serving Neville a glass of butterbeer.

"Nothing, Dobby," said Harry sadly. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"Is Master Harry Potter sick?" Dobby asked, looking concerned.

"Don't worry about it, Dobby." Harry took a deep breath. "There's nothing you can do."

Tears were now flowing freely from the elf's eyes as he hugged Harry's knees. "Harry Potter is a good master! He should not be dying! What is he dying from? Maybe Dobby can help."

Harry returned the hug. "Dobby, you're a good elf, and a good friend. I'm afraid that there's nothing anyone can do. Now, take the rest of the day off."

"Yes, Master Harry," he said, before disappearing with a loud crack.

Harry looked at everybody with a smile. "I just can't get him to stop calling me master." Everyone chuckled a bit.

Somehow, after that, the conversation became a bit more normal. After lunch, Harry, Hermione and Neville went to karate class.

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Although things were a bit more solemn, they were mostly back to normal. Harry seemed to get back into his training with a passion, and was soon facing everyone and lasting five minutes before being hit. Hermione tried the same thing and only lasted two.

Harry and Hermione were spending a lot more time alone together for the past week. The unspoken sentiment was that if they couldn't have the lifetime they wanted, then they wouldn't waste a moment that they had. The day before Ginny's birthday, Hermione and Harry were alone in his room when he said, "Hermione, I've been thinking."

Recognizing his sad tone of voice, she realized that this was probably about his upcoming death. He'd already told her how he wanted his funeral handled. She would've told him not to talk about that, except that she realized that he really would die, and she wanted to honor his last wishes. "What about?" she asked in a neutral tone of voice.

"When I beat Riddle, I'll need to be killed immediately. Someone will have to be there to...to destroy the last Horcrux so he dies."

Making sure to keep a stiff upper lip, she responded in a business-like tone of voice, "I suppose."

"I," Harry swallowed nervously. "I think would prefer if your face was the last thing I see." He swallowed again. "If you don't want to, I'll understand. But I, I'd like you to destroy the bit of Riddle's soul in me."

Hermione looked at him, astonished. She blinked back the tears that were threatening to fall. She did not think she was capable of doing what he asked. She didn't know what to say, but was saved from responding by a squeal of joy coming from the other side of the room.

"Who is that!" shouted Harry, immediately getting between Hermione and the noise.

"It is Dobby!" he said excitedly. "Dobby is sorry Dobby is spying on his master, and Dobby is deserving of whatever punishment Master Harry Potter inflicts, but Dobby is wanting to know what Master is dying from! No one is telling Dobby, saying it is Master Harry Potter's business, so Dobby is having to find out. All Dobby is hearing is the word Horcrux that Dobby isn't knowing. Now, Dobby is hearing that a bit of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's soul is inside Master."

"Er, yes," said Harry after reviewing what his small friend had said. "He can't die while that piece of his soul is inside me, so I'll have to die when I kill him."

"No, master. You is not having to die. Elves is knowing ancient magic of souls. This is being from before elves is being enslaved. Elves is doing powerful soul magic to fix a broken soul or even separate and banish a destroyed portion of a soul before it is infecting the rest of the soul. One day, a very bad and powerful wizard is catching an elf named Frugey trying to heal his soul and he is binding Frugey and his descendents as slaves forever with very dark magic, and is stopping them from using soul magic as long as they is slaves. The other elves is leaving because they is being afraid he is doing the same to them, but Frugey's mate is staying with him and is allowing herself to become a slave. Although they wasn't being allowed to do soul magic, they is teaching it, and it is taught to all elves."

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed in thought. "I'll want to talk about that history more later, Dobby, but are you saying that you know how to

get rid of the piece of Tom Riddle's soul inside Harry without harming him?"

"Yes, Dobby is knowing how and can be doing it because Dobby is free."

She looked intently at her boyfriend. "Do you want to try?"

He turned to the free elf. "What do you need to do?"

"You must be lying on the floor where Dobby can touch your head."

Harry complied, and Dobby went through a process wherein he did detect the foreign soul attached to Harry's. The moment Dobby severed its connection was painful, causing Harry to scream, but it didn't last long. Harry began to feel happier than he'd ever been. He felt light as a feather, as if a weight he'd been carrying for years was finally released.

"How do you feel?" asked Hermione, bringing him back to reality.

He grinned at her. "Never better."

Hermione performed the detection spell on her boyfriend, seeing, "No dark magic! You now really are just Harry!" She hugged and kissed him, and then turned toward Dobby, who was shocked at how fast she picked him up and hugged him tightly, kissing his forehead. "Thank you so much!" She realized that she was crying again, but this time was out of happiness.

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Harry and Hermione soon marched down the stairs with Dobby, who was blushing madly while sitting on their shoulders. Sirius and the Grangers (who'd been told the truth after they demanded to know why everyone was acting like they were at a funeral) were the only ones there, and were thrilled to hear the news. They fire-called Dumbledore immediately, who came and confirmed that the Horcrux was no longer inside Harry.

The next morning, the others celebrated the good news as well, and Ginny's birthday party at the Burrow unofficially doubled as a 'Harry's Gonna Live!' party for those who knew what had happened. The next day, Hermione, Harry, and Sirius went to his island that is the Bermuda Triangle for the weekend.

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Early in the morning, the indigenous animals of Black Island were treated to a strange sight. A brown cat was chasing a big black dog that was chasing a lion with a wild, black mane. They raced around the island, away from the beach, where the cat managed to pass the dog. By the time they reached their destination, one of the runes that protected the island, the cat was one paw ahead of the lion and touched it first.

The cat transformed into Hermione, and was soon followed by Harry and Sirius changing back as well. All three of them were panting, and Hermione was positively glowing. "I beat you, Harry!" she exclaimed happily.

"Fine," he said with a mock pout, "I'll pay up the bet once we get rid of Sirius."

"What bet?" asked Padfoot.

"Well," he responded shyly, "I owe her a snog."

"Really," Sirius replied with a smirk. "You should always pay your gambling debts. I'll be going back to the cabin. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"What wouldn't you do?" asked Harry with a grin.

"Keep my girlfriend waiting for a snog. See you later." He turned back into Padfoot and ran off.

Looking at his girlfriend, Harry smirked. "I just remembered a bet we made here a year ago, over who would complete their transformation first. You owe me five snogs."

She looked at him in mock indignation. "Just because I changed fifty-two seconds after you doesn't mean you win."

"Earlier is earlier," he said as he put his arms around her and began to pay his gambling debt.

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After spending a few days enjoying the island, the beach and Hermione's bathing suit, Harry had to admit that his holiday was too short. They returned to Black Manor for the last week of summer to find that Remus had picked up their school supplies in Diagon Alley. The last few days of summer went by without incident, and before they knew it, September 1st had arrived.

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Chapter 39 – Snogging in the Rain

Despite his preference that the summer go on forever, Harry couldn't help but smile when he saw the sign that read, 'Platform Nine and Three Quarters,' and said it would be departing at eleven o'clock. He and Hermione had passed through the barrier together holding hands and continued walking toward the scarlet engine while Sirius appeared behind them. It was decided that in the event that Voldemort attacked the platform, Hermione's muggle parents would be a liability that someone would have to protect, and they decided not to risk creating that problem, so they said their goodbyes at Grimmauld Place.

Through the smoke, the Boy-Who-Lived could see a few aurors in uniform looking around, and was sure there were more around. "I would guess that Riddle won't attack here. It would be too predictable."

"You're probably right," she agreed, "but I'm still glad we're wearing our armor under our clothes."

"Me, too." She looked around. "I still feel strange being one of the few students not carrying a trunk."

Smiling, her boyfriend suggested, "I could get my shrunk trunk out of my wallet and resize it. Then open it and take your trunk out of it and allow you to carry it. It should be pretty heavy with all those books. Then I'd re-shrink my trunk and watch you struggle with yours."

"Very funny," she responded. "I guess we'd better go to the prefects' compartment now." She squeezed her boyfriend's hand. "I'm glad Professor Dumbledore asked you whether you wanted to be prefect or not before giving the position to someone else. You did earn it."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Any chance to walk around the castle late at night with you..."

"It won't just be with me," she said while blushing. "We'll have to do rounds with whomever we're scheduled with."

"I suppose."

When they arrived at the Prefects' compartment, Harry was surprised to see the absolute worst person anyone could possibly pick as the Slytherin prefect. The idiot was sneering at him like he'd accomplished something.

"What is Dumbledore thinking giving Draco Malfoy a prefect badge?" Harry hissed at his girlfriend.

She sighed. "I don't know, but there's nothing we can do about it. That cow Parkinson is the girl prefect."

Draco suddenly started sniffing the air with an expression that he'd detected something foul. "If you're wondering what that odor is, a mudblood just walked in here."

Pansy laughed, but she was the only one. Everyone else was glaring at him. The six-foot-three Head Boy, Kenneth Towler of Gryffindor, got right in Draco's face. "You just earned yourself a detention, you little Death Eater spawn! Your daddy's friends killed my mother last summer," He grabbed the now terrified-looking Slytherin's shirt and was pushing him against the wall while Harry watched in admiration, "and I am not putting up with their pureblooded bulls..."

"Kenny!" called the Ravenclaw Head Girl, Sally Fawcett, as Draco whimpered in fear. "Let the pathetic Death Nibbler go. We can tell Dumbledore that we won't work with him. Don't strangle the little boy like he deserves." She looked around. "I'm sure none of you want to do your patrols with this piece of trash."

While the older Slytherin prefects remained silent, Pansy was too stupid to keep her mouth shut. "How can you manhandle Draco like that? When his father..."

"So you want to be on the list, too?" asked Fawcett. "Fine. Maybe we should have put in a special request not to have You-Know-Who sympathizers as prefects." Harry, along with most of the others, chuckled. "Accio, badge!" She summoned Draco's and then Pansy's prefect badge, leaving a hole in their robes. "Now get out, both of you!" Once the two Slytherin fifth-years exited, Sally turned to the others with a smile on her face. "Alright, now that that business is over, let's get this meeting started."

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"So, there the little ferret was, crying while Ken was holding him against the wall," said Harry happily, entertaining his friends after they got back from the meeting. They'd taken the first patrol on the train so they were done with it. They all laughed, especially Ron and Luna, although they weren't sure if she was laughing about that or something in the Quibbler that her face was hidden behind.

"It wasn't that funny," said Hermione, although it was obvious that she was trying very hard to avoid laughing.

"Truthfully," said Harry, "that should be done every time someone like Malfoy uses that word. Imagine how many people would stop acting like that if it weren't tolerated."

"Well, well, well," came Draco's familiar sneer from the doorway. He was wearing a fresh, non-ripped robe. "It looks like we found the mudblood, half-blood and blood-traitor compartment." He was flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, who chuckled at his statement, but that didn't stop everyone in the compartment from laughing out loud. "Why are you laughing?"

While pulling out his wand for show, Harry answered, "Because they know what I'm about to do to you."

Draco smirked. "If only you knew what the Dark Lord is going to do to you and Hogw...Whaaaa!" At that moment, Draco's body began to expand the way Aunt Marge had a few years before. The buttons on his jumper and pants popped, and the band of his expensive watch broke while his bodyguards watched in confusion. Realizing what Malfoy had implied, Hermione performed legilimency on Draco, finding out that he had been told by his father that Voldemort would attack Hogwarts before Christmas, but not when. When she began seeing Malfoy's fantasies, she exited his mind to see the boy's feet were leaving the floor. Hermione performed a banishing spell on him so he'd float into the hall. Then the other two Slytherins, along with the broken watch, were banished into the hall behind their alpha and the door was closed and locked magically.

“He was serious,” declared Hermione with a concerned look on her face.

Harry grinned. “You mean when he said, ‘Whaaa?’ Yes, I think he was seriously scared.”

She rolled her eyes at her boyfriend. “I meant about Riddle.”

“He’s always after me,” said Harry with a shrug.

“I think Hermione meant if he was going to attack Hogwarts,” said Luna with a dreamy voice from behind the Quibbler issue she’d been reading the whole time.

“What?” asked Harry, who hadn’t been paying much attention while he was concentrating on blowing Malfoy up.

“He bragged the Dark Lord was going to do something to you and Hogwarts,” said Ginny.

“It would make sense,” said Neville. “The Ministry’s located there as well.”

“If he can manage it, I don’t think he’d have any serious problems after overpowering Hogwarts,” said Ron. “It’s got Dumbledore, Vehosia, and Harry in one place.”

“I read his mind. His father told him that Riddle is attacking Hogwarts before Christmas, but didn’t tell him exactly when.” Hermione looked worried. “But what about the students?”

“He doesn’t care how many kids get killed in the process,” said Harry sternly. “He didn’t mind trying to kill me at one-year-old.”

“But they’ll keep the kids safe if that happens,” asked Neville. “Won’t they?”

“They’ll try, but it won’t work,” said Harry grimly. “He likes to kill the people he considers defenseless. The teachers will try to evacuate us, and cut their potential army in half. They won’t realize that if that battle is lost, there’ll be no place for the kids to go and be safe. Then

they'll have to fight without the adults. It's better to unite now – at least the students that can fight, maybe fourth year and up – and increase our chances.”

Hermione took on an excited expression. “What if...well, maybe...if only...What if those who would want to fight in case of an attack organized and practiced fighting ...maybe even came up with a battle plan for defending the castle?”

Ginny's eyes went wide. “You mean, like an army? Not just the dueling club that Sirius runs.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “Although that might be a good source for membership.”

“Dumbledore wouldn't approve,” said Ron miserably.

“He'd say we're too young,” added Neville.

“What if,” said Harry, looking each of them in the eyes in turn, “we keep it a secret from the teachers, even Sirius?” They all gasped. “Then, when Riddle attacks, we present our plan and demand to be able to fight for our world.”

Hermione beamed at him with pride, although she looked a bit nervous. “That sounds perfect, although it is against the rules...but this is about our survival.”

“Perfect,” said Harry. “Now all we need is someone to lead it. Any suggestions?” All of them, even Luna, were now staring intently at him. “What?” he asked, oblivious to their meaning.

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“I still think you're all mental if you think people are gonna listen to me,” said Harry to his friends as they shared a carriage on the way to Hogwarts.

They had all unanimously insisted that he lead the group they were discussing, much to his surprise. Even Luna had said, “The nargmites are circling your head, which means you're a great leader.”

Stifling a laugh, Ron had shown support for his girlfriend by adding, "You can't argue with the nargmites."

"A lot more people look up to you than you realize," responded Hermione as they continued riding the thestral-drawn carriages.

"Only to see my scar," he commented, earning a snort from Ron.

"I mean it, Harry. A lot of people admire you."

"But will they really listen to me?"

Taking a deep breath, Hermione said, "There's only one way to find out. We'll start to spread the word in the Gryffindor common room tomorrow and take it from there. Where do you think we should meet?"

Harry immediately declared, "The Room of Requirement should be perfect!"

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After the feast, where the new students were sorted and Dumbledore reminded the students to stay away from the parts of the castle that the Ministry was using, Harry and Hermione led the new Gryffindors to the common room, where his girlfriend immediately began talking to the people who had been members of the dueling club last year. She shared with them Malfoy's words and their suspicions about an attack on the castle. Most of them agreed that they didn't want to hide in the dormitory while their world's fate was decided, and wanted to be part of the resistance and help come up with a battle plan. Those that were close friends (or more) with people outside of Gryffindor agreed to help spread the word discretely about their first meeting, which was planned that Friday night.

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The next evening, the Head Boy and Girl, Kenneth Towler and Sally Fawcett of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw respectively, walked into the Headmaster's office.

“Good evening, Mr. Towler, Miss Fawcett. Have a seat. Would you like a lemon drop?” He indicated the bowl that had been full every time either had been in that office, which wasn’t very often.

“No, thank you,” said Kenny while Sally shook her head.

“Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes. “I understand that there was a problem with a few of the new prefects on the train.”

“Exactly,” said Sally. “We want Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson replaced.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened. “I had heard that rumor, but never expected that you would be so willing to dismiss someone so easily. Everyone deserves a chance to prove themselves.”

“The first words out of his mouth at the meeting were calling Hermione Granger a mudblood,” said Kenny passionately. “He obviously has embraced You-Know-Who’s philosophy – the same one that got my mother killed.”

“He’s made a mistake. I’m sure that he’ll apologize,” he replied calmly.

“No!” demanded Sally. “He has been using that term openly since his second year. Everyone on the Gryffindor Quidditch team heard him call Hermione that then, and no teacher did anything about it.” Dumbledore looked shocked that she knew that. “We asked people in Gryffindor about him, and then asked some of the professors about his behavior in class and his grades. We wanted to know what he’d done to earn a prefect badge.”

Dumbledore swallowed.

Kenny said, “Professor McGonagall told us that his grades in Transfiguration are mediocre at best, and that the only thing he excels at is causing trouble, usually by spouting off his prejudiced nonsense, and all the other professors agreed. In fact, the only teacher that ever said anything nice about him is Snape, and he doesn’t teach anymore.”

“Professor Snape,” Dumbledore corrected him.

Sally continued, “The only class he ever got good grades in was Potions, but Professor O’Brien proved that he was a cheater in her first potions class, and she suspects that the finished potions he and a few others had with them were brewed by *Professor Snape*.”

“She may suspect it, but it hasn’t been proven,” defended Dumbledore.

“He’s actually done worse in that subject for the past year than any other since he can’t cheat anymore,” added Kenny.

“To put it simply,” said Sally, “he hasn’t earned his prefectship, and no one feels safe patrolling with that Death Eater wanna-be. I believe that he would use the opportunity to attack Hermione and any other muggle-born he patrols with.”

“And then Harry Potter would murder him,” added Kenny.

“We also think that he’d use his privileges to help You-Know-Who. Most people believe that he will try to attack Hogwarts this year,” said Sally. “The castle houses his three most likely targets – you, Minister Vehosia, and Harry Potter. If Draco’s father has any way of communicating with him, or has already given him orders, he adds to the danger.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I can see that you really have thought this out. What do you have against Miss Parkinson?”

“She’s Draco’s girlfriend, and defended him at the meeting,” said Kenny.

“And she gets even worse grades than him,” added Sally.

“And she has made it clear that she is a sympathizer to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s cause, just like her boyfriend and his bodyguards.”

“And to make it clear to you, Headmaster,” Sally added, “We will not work with Death Nibblers. If you refuse to replace them, then you’ll need to new Heads.”

“Not only that,” added Kenny, “but many other prefects, as well.”

Dumbledore looked older than ever before as he took a deep breath. “I shall consider your suggestion. You will have my decision by the end of the week. Until then, both Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson will be suspended of their prefect duties. You are dismissed.”

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The week went by too quickly, by Harry’s reckoning. All the teachers were the same as the previous year, including Sirius, who reopened his dueling club. Dumbledore did follow the Head Boy and Girl’s wishes and gave the fifth-year prefect positions to Slytherins who weren’t known to be Voldemort sympathizers like Draco and Pansy. In this case, they were Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, both of whom were civil toward the others, if not particularly friendly. All the prefects felt safer patrolling with them than their predecessors, but Harry reminded Hermione not to drop her guard around them either.

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Before the Boy-Who-Lived knew it, almost half of the students fourth-year and above were gathered in the Room of Requirement for their first meeting. Everyone was talking together in groups. Angelina Johnson had even reminded Harry of the Quidditch tryouts the following morning.

When he felt everyone was there, he walked up behind the small podium that the huge room had provided and cleared his throat. Nobody but his girlfriend, who smiled at him, noticed. He put a *sonorus* charm on his throat and spoke up.

“Attention, everybody.” They all ended their conversations and began staring at him. He could now feel several golden Snitches flying around in his stomach – or were they Bludgers? His ears were now pink. “Yes, well, thank you for coming. As you know, the reason we’re here is because we believe that Hogwarts is going to be attacked

soon. Dumbledore and the Ministry are both here, so we feel it is too tempting of a target.”

Someone wearing Ravenclaw robes yelled out, “You’re here, too, and he seems to always be after you.”

Glancing down for a moment, Harry took a deep breath and answered, “Yes, you’re right. There’s a reason for that. A prophecy was made before I was born that basically says that I’ve got to be the one to finish him if he’s going to be finished.” Everyone gasped. “That’s why that coward tried to kill me as a baby. Tom Riddle, which, by the way is Voldemort’s,” most people gasped. “real name. Yes, I know that it’s taboo, but if he could get in here, he wouldn’t be waiting for someone to mention his chosen name. However, if it makes you feel better, I’ll call him Riddle. The point is that I have to handle him personally, but I’m sure they’ll be plenty of Death Eaters for the rest of you to handle.

“Anyway, if he attacks, we believe that the teachers will try to get us to hide away while they fight Riddle. We would wait while our fate is decided by others. If he wins, then we’ll all be killed or enslaved. I believe that we can help increase the odds of that fight in our favor, and we can stand united with the teachers and the Ministry, whether they want us there or not, and we CAN make a difference!” There was an unexpected burst of applause. He actually smiled at this.

“We want to join together and train, and become Hogwarts’ Army, and show Riddle that he can’t scare us anymore!” There was more applause. “We’ve come up with a few different ideas of fighting groups that we can divide up into, and would be happy to hear more ideas. We’ll train at least once a week in each of these divisions. The wonderful thing about this room is that it can accommodate as many groups as we can come up with. This is what we have so far...”

Harry went on to explain the ideas that he and his friends had come up with for defending the castle that they didn’t believe the adults had thought of yet. They were met with enthusiastic support, and the people decided which group they wanted to be part of, and the next meeting was arranged. Hermione insisted that everyone that wanted

to be a part of the group sign a document that she made for the meeting.

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"You were really great," said Hermione in the common room after the meeting. "The way you carried yourself, and talked to us. You really inspired confidence."

"The question is if it'll work. I don't want to lead them to their deaths." He sighed. "Do you really think..."

"Yes, I do. I believe that our plan is sound and that with your leadership..."

"You're more of a leader than I..."

"You are a born leader," she said passionately. "I know you don't like it, and all you want is to be ordinary, but you are an extraordinary leader, an extraordinary person. You refuse to wait around doing nothing while others plan your destiny. You took control of your life last year."

"With your help," he added. "And Sirius' as well."

"Yes," she said, blushing at the mention of her name. "Now it's time for you to help all of us students take control of our destiny instead of waiting for our 'protectors' to be murdered."

"I hope we can do it."

"I know we can," she said before kissing him soundly, effectively clearing away his doubts, along with the rest of her boyfriend's thoughts.

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Harry woke up the morning of Hermione's sixteenth birthday excited. He remembered how splendidly things had gone the year before, and was hoping for a repeat performance. He wanted everything to be

perfect all day, because he had something very special to give her at dinner, which he'd arranged to be elsewhere than the Great Hall.

He was at the foot of the stairs holding a bouquet of roses to wish his girlfriend a, "Happy Birthday," as soon as he saw her.

The birthday-girl smiled brightly at her boyfriend as she continued down the stairs. "Thank you." She kissed him soundly before taking the roses from him. "Ouch!"

To Harry's dismay, Hermione had grabbed the roses in such a way that her finger was stabbed with a thorn and was now bleeding. He looked panicky as he said, "I'm sorry." He pulled out his wand and she allowed him to perform a quick healing spell on her. "I'm really sorry about that, Hermione."

"A lot of people remove the thorns to prevent that from happening," she commented, but upon seeing how penitent he looked with his eyes downcast, she said, "That's alright. The roses are beautiful. Let me just put them in water and I'll be right back."

As he watched her return up the stairs, he smiled. Things hadn't gone as smoothly as he'd wanted, but it wasn't so bad. It could be worse.

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After their morning workout (and subsequent showers), the young couple made their way into the Great Hall for breakfast. They sat together at the Gryffindor table with Ron, Neville and Ginny, and were busily eating when the mail arrived. Among the first owls in the Great Hall was Hedwig, who was carrying a small paper bag tied to her leg. She flew straight to Hermione and held out her leg.

She smiled as she untied the package from her boyfriend's owl, and found that, like last year, it contained a present from her parents, as well as a new present from her boyfriend. What Harry had gotten her was a stack of pictures of them from the previous year.

"I, er, thought you might want to add them to that photo album," he told her.

"They're wonderful," she said as she was looking at a photo of them dancing at the Yule Ball.

Suddenly, there was a thump in front of her, and the pitcher of pumpkin juice spilled over, filling Hermione's plate, lap, and presents with its contents. She let out a small shriek, drawing attention from other Gryffindors, who began laughing at her. Her ears turned pink. Harry, in the meantime, looked devastated. "It's okay," she said calmly, although it was obvious that she wasn't happy. "I can fix them..."

That's when a small orange shape on the table in front of Hermione, dripping with pumpkin juice, began to ruffle its feathers, getting the offending liquid on all five friends, but none as badly as Hermione, whose face was now dripping with the juice. They could all hear laughter from other Gryffindors down the table, including Fred and George. To her dismay, Ginny recognized the creature as, "Errol!" the Weasley family owl.

Ron added, "He's got a letter."

Hermione saw that the bird did indeed have a dripping wet letter tied to its leg, which it was now holding out toward her. After wiping her face off with a napkin, she cautiously untied the parcel, and was able to read the first few letters of her name from the envelope. She tore open the wet envelope, and managed to determine that, "It's a birthday card from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley."

"That was...nice of them," said Harry. "Just too bad they sent it with Errol."

"Yeah," said Hermione, half-heartedly. "It's the thought that counts, isn't it?" She turned to Ron and Ginny. "Don't tell your parents what happened. I don't want them to feel bad." They nodded and Hermione quickly cleaned herself and then Errol with her wand. She even managed to save the pictures and her parents' present as well, and resolved to open it alone. She'd confided in Harry after much coaxing that her mysterious present from the previous year was a box of 'fancy undergarments that her mum picked out.' That was enough to get Harry to blush and never ask again. He figured that it was best if she opened up the gift in private this year as well.

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The morning went by alright, and soon they were eating lunch in the Great Hall. Hedwig flew to Hermione and dropped a package in front of her. She opened it and found a dress. She unfolded it and examined it. It was emerald green with gold trimmings. The dress was low-cut and sleeveless. Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek.

"Thank you," she said, standing up and holding the dress against her. Ginny looked at her with surprise in her eyes. "What's the problem, Ginny?" She said nothing. Hermione found the label which revealed the size.

"Extra Large!?! HARRY JAMES POTTER! Do you think I need an Extra Large dress? I'm only a medium size! Do you think I'm fat?"

People in the hall began laughing. With tears in her face, Hermione ran out of the hall. Harry, looking mortified, ran after her.

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Hermione was refusing to talk to Harry, no matter how much he begged her to, shouting apologies at her as she stayed ahead of him. She went to her dorm and continued crying until Ginny came in.

"Come for a good laugh, have you?" Hermione asked.

"No, I have not. Harry explained everything to me, since you won't speak to him. He told me that he guessed a size, but he specified a number. Apparently, he asked Lavender Brown what size she thought you were and ordered the dress size to match."

"But there was no need for him to get Extra Large!"

"He didn't mean to get you Extra Large. He doesn't know anything about women's dress sizes. He's used to wearing those hand-me-downs from that pig cousin of his. How do you think he's going to know the right size? There is no point in asking you for it because it would ruin the surprise. What do you think he's going to do – take Polyjuice Potion and pretend to be you in order to get the right size?"

"No," Hermione replied. She seemed to be calming down a bit.

"He tried his best. It's the first time he's ever ordered women's clothing and he has learned from his mistake. Remember, you are a witch and you can adjust the size by magic. Or, teach me the charm and I'll sort it out for you."

"I didn't think of that." Hermione put on the extra large dress as she told Ginny the charm. She raised her wand and cast the spell. The dress changed size until it was a perfect fit.

"There, that should do it," said Ginny. Hermione stepped in front of a mirror and admired herself. "You should go downstairs and show Harry the dress."

She sighed. "I guess I should apologize to him." Ginny simply nodded as her friend walked down the stairs.

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Harry was sitting on a chair in the common room with his head down. He was miserable. All that time he'd spent looking through catalogues of women's dresses was for nothing. He thought he'd picked out a perfect dress. "That's the last time I'll ask Lavender for help," he grumbled to himself. He heard footsteps on the girls' stairs, and looked up, expecting to see Ginny coming down to tell him that Hermione still wouldn't speak to him. They'd been up there a long time, and he was glad that they didn't have any classes until Ancient Runes, which didn't start for another hour.

Instead, he glimpsed the loveliest creature he'd ever seen. He stood up and walked toward Hermione, who was looking down at the stairs. "You look beautiful. You must have fixed it. Ginny said you could." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake, but I wasn't trying to..."

"I'm sorry, too," she cut him off. "I over-reacted. I know you wouldn't purposely insult me, and you were trying to do something nice, and I do like the dress."

"It looks good on you."

"Thank you," she said, and then kissed him softly.

"Could you wear it just before dinner?" he asked. "I've...got some plans, and I'd like it if you were wearing it."

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"Where are you taking me?" Hermione asked as Harry led her by the hand out the entrance hall onto the grounds. He was wearing his dark green suit he'd bought the previous summer. It had been expanded slightly to account for his growth since he'd gotten it. He'd thought about blindfolding her, but would never do that while Voldemort lived. It was too much of a risk for her to get attacked while blindfolded. As a result, he was just having her simply follow him. He'd only told her that he wanted to take her for a walk. He was not looking at the overcast sky as he patted the small box in his pocket. "It's almost time for dinner, and I'm starving."

"I know," said Harry as he led her. "I just want to walk around the lake with you. I thought it would be romantic."

Her expression softened. "It is romantic. Thank you."

He took a deep breath as they continued walking around the lake, holding hands. "I know things haven't gone the way I wanted them to – the way you deserved them to – but I want you to know that I do love you and I am trying to make your birthday special."

"I know, Harry. This just seems like one of those...who's that?" She pointed to a small figure up ahead who was standing next to a table with two chairs. There was a lit candle in the middle of the table. Before Harry could answer, the figure came into focus. "Dobby," she exclaimed happily. He was wearing a small black tuxedo. Hermione could see and smell the plates of veal cutlet, mashed potatoes and green beans on the table, along with two bottles of butterbeer.

"Dobby is happy to be seeing Harry Potter and his Hermie," he said excitedly, "and is wishing Miss Hermie a happy birthday."

"Thank you, Dobby," she said happily.

The elf then turned to Harry. "Dobby is finished guarding the food, so now Dobby is going. If you is needing anything, just call Dobby. Dobby will be returning with dessert in thirty minutes."

"Thank you," said Harry, and his elf disappeared with a small pop.

Harry pulled out a chair for Hermione, and she sat down. She thanked him as he sat across from her. "I hope you don't mind," he said conversationally. "I wanted a nice, private dinner for just the two of us."

"It's lovely," she said, as she jabbed her fork into the veal and began to cut it. She took a bite and closed her eyes sensuously. "It's delicious," she declared and her boyfriend smiled at her.

BOOM! Thunder erupted above them as it got darker, and rain began to pour down on them both, drenching them (including Hermione's new dress) and their dinner in a matter of seconds. Harry began to swear vehemently as he got up. He removed his fake glasses so he could see properly. "It doesn't matter what I do! Nothing is working right! I'm sorry! I'm..."

Hermione cut him off with laughter. He wondered if she'd finally lost her mind. "Don't you see," she said between snorts of mirth, "the harder you try, the worse things turn out."

He found himself beginning to join in the laughter. "I wanted it to be so special," he said while laughing. "I wanted to..." He then reached into his pocket, pulling out a small, black velvet box that got drenched immediately. She looked at it and gasped. "I think we're a bit young for an actual proposal," he said, getting a bit serious, "but I thought I'd give you a promise ring." He opened the box, revealing a sterling silver band with no stone on it. It had, '*Harry & Hermione*' engraved on it. He looked her in the eyes, even as water dripped down their faces. "I want to show you and everyone else that I love you, and I do intend to marry you when it's the right time. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. For now, I ask that you'll wear this symbol of my love, until I replace it with an engagement ring." He took it out of the box, she silently held out her left hand, and he placed it upon her finger, and it magically sized itself. Considering what had happened at lunch, he was glad he'd placed that charm on it.

With the rain falling as it was, he couldn't tell if his beloved had shed any tears or not while he slid the ring on her finger, or when she kissed him passionately as they stood out in the rain.

They were interrupted shortly by a small pop next to them. They broke apart immediately, and Harry aimed his hand at the intruder, ready to fight whoever it was.

"Dobby is sorry Dobby isn't putting rain protection over the table," he said sadly. Even in the rain, it was obvious that he was crying. "Your meal is being ruined and it is being Dobby's fault. Harry Potter should be punishing Dobby."

It was at that moment that they both looked at the plates full of what had become soup and started laughing again. "That's alright, Dobby. You didn't make it rain. Do you think you could make us two more plates and bring them to the Room of Requirement?" Harry said. He glanced at Hermione, who nodded happily. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir," he responded before popping away.

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand, and they began walking back toward the castle. Harry began singing, "Snogging in the rain, just snoggi..."

"Shut up," she laughed, before walking around to kiss him once more.

They slowly made their way back to the castle, stopping every few minutes to kiss. They opened the door and walked right in, dripping all over the floor. They hadn't taken five steps inside before they heard the familiar drawl of Draco Malfoy's voice out of the nearby Great Hall. They heard him and his bodyguards walk in their direction.

"It's Potter and his filthy mudblood! What have you been doing, shagging in the mud?"

The couple glanced at each other for a moment, and continued walking toward the stairs, completely ignoring the ferret.

"You won't ignore me, mudblood!" he shouted at their backs while pulling out his wand. They both heard him do that and pulled their wands out, preparing to defend themselves. Harry was wearing his dragon armor underneath his suit, but didn't think Hermione was wearing hers under the dress.

"Expelliarmus!" came the last voice they expected to help them. They turned to see Severus Snape catching Malfoy's wand. Harry tensed up even more than he was already at the sight of that murderer.

Draco rounded on his head of house. "Why'd you do that, Snape? I could've..."

"Cursing students in the back will get you in trouble," he said evenly, while handing him back his wand. "All three of you, go to the Slytherin dormitory. I'll deal with...the happy couple." He silently cast a Patronus into the nearby Great Hall as Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle complied.

"Was that a doe?" asked Hermione, curious about the silver animal that had no doubt gone to fetch the headmaster after only allowing them a brief glimpse of it.

"Silence!" he hissed angrily. "Dripping water all over the castle is against school rules. Even if I don't have the happy privilege of punishing you myself, I will see that you..."

"Hello, Severus," said Dumbledore from behind him. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Harry watched the headmaster's eyes wander around and focus on them. He could swear that his eyes focused on Hermione's left hand for a second longer than necessary. "I see. Mr. Potter and Miss Granger were apparently caught in the storm," he said calmly.

"They are befouling the castle, even as we speak." It was true that they were still dripping with water, and a puddle was forming beneath them. "They may be your favorites, but I demand that they be disciplined."

"I suppose that you are correct." He turned to them. "Ten points each will be removed from Gryffindor, and you will both serve a detention

with Professor McGonagall tomorrow night." He turned to the head of Slytherin. "Does that satisfy you, Severus, or shall I have them hung by their thumbs, as well?"

"Fine," Snape hissed, and then left in the direction of the dungeons.

Dumbledore turned to the young couple and pulled out his wand, drying Hermione, Harry and then the puddle. "You should have dried yourself off when you entered the castle," he said, conversationally, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Happy birthday, Miss Granger."

"Th-thank you, sir."

"I do like that new ring on your finger. Incidentally, you both look quite nice. Good evening." Dumbledore left for his office, and the young couple went to the Room of Requirement, where Dobby had their new meals prepared.

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The next few weeks flew by with classes, Sirius' dueling club, Quidditch, personal training, and H.A. training. All McGonagall had Harry and Hermione do for detention was to magically clean her classroom, which took about five minutes. She mentioned that she didn't think getting water on the floor during a storm should be an offense at all when a simple spell will clean it up.

Hogwarts' Army was going very well, and Harry was pleased with the progress they were making. He was amazed at how the Room of Requirement was able to meet all their needs. The incredibly high ceiling that it developed for them was the most incredible part of it to Harry. The people who were with them were all eager to learn and practice their parts in Hogwarts' Army.

When the '*Howler*' reported a mass breakout from Azkaban during the first week of October, it served to further motivate the members of the H.A., as well as convince others to join. Harry had his remaining dragon hide turned into as many vests as he could, which turned out to be twenty-eight, which he distributed to the people whom he thought were doing the best in their training. They accepted the vests gratefully, vowing to keep them on always.

On October 30th, Draco seemed particularly smug during Care of Magical Creatures class, so Harry performed Legilimency on him, and found out the information he needed. Using charmed coins that his brilliant girlfriend had invented for communication, he called an H.A. meeting that night. He began it by saying the words, "The attack will be tomorrow."

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Chapter 40 – The Battle of the Ages

Harry woke up on October 31st, 1995 very tired. He didn't know exactly what time he'd gone to sleep, but he knew that it had taken a long time. However, he knew that he didn't have time to stay in bed. He shook himself and got ready for his morning exercise.

He gave Hermione an exceptionally passionate kiss when he met her at the bottom of her staircase, which she returned enthusiastically. They both knew that all their future plans rode on the events of that day, and there was no guarantee that either of them would survive. He looked her in the eyes and said, "I love you. No matter what happens today, never forget that."

"I love you, too, and I'll love you forever."

Soon, the others joined them, so the five Gryffindor exercise partners made their way to the Room of Requirement, which they'd begun using for their workout instead of Harry's trunk. They met Luna there, and agreed to do a light workout that day, only enough to wake up their muscles, not tire them out. They figured that they'd get plenty of exercise before the day was over.

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On the way to breakfast, they noticed a large group of about forty aurors heading out the door. Harry asked, "What's going on?" and one of them called over his shoulder.

"Attack in Diagon Alley. We're all going."

Harry's jaw dropped. He'd naturally seen small groups of aurors leaving the castle to handle attacks, but never this many. He also knew it was standard Death Eater policy now to stop the floo from working wherever they were attacking, which is why the aurors stopped using the floo to go anywhere, instead running outside Hogwarts' wards and apparating as close to the attack as possible. He also knew, "It's a diversion!"

The aurors had already left when he whispered that to his friends. "Riddle doesn't want the aurors here while he attacks, so he's drawn them out."

Hermione's brow furrowed as she considered this. "You're probably right. The attack will be easier now that most of the aurors are gone."

"Well," said Ron, "We'd better get breakfast while we have the chance." Everyone stared at him like he's grown an extra arm.

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" his sister asked.

"Er, we'll need energy if we're going to fight Death Eaters," he said before walking into the Great Hall.

Knowing that Ron did have a point, Harry said, "Let's go," and followed him.

While the Boy-Who-Lived agreed they needed energy, he didn't think that Ron needed the stack of twenty pancakes he'd begun devouring, and silently wondered if even Ron could eat that much. Harry wasn't feeling very hungry himself, but forced a few sausages and a single pancake down before they heard a loud explosion outside.

Harry and all the H.A., as well as Dumbledore, stood up. Fawkes appeared in front of him with a note. The headmaster read the note, and then calmly announced, "It would appear that Voldemort's forces have decided to attack Hogwarts today. Prefects, please escort all students to their dormitories, where they should be safe."

Harry felt the eyes of every member of Hogwarts' Army upon him as he started walking toward the aged professor.

"Yes, Harry?" he said.

"I believe that it's time to fulfill the prophecy," he responded evenly.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and reopened them. "I believe you are correct." He sighed. "I suppose Miss Granger will be with you as well."

“Actually,” he said nervously. “I’ve been working with a group of sixty-nine students fourth-year and above on ways to defend the castle for the past few months. We call ourselves Hogwarts’ Army. We have a plan, and especially with the aurors gone, you need us.”

“That’s preposterous!” declared Snape, who was nearby.

Harry glared at his former teacher. “What’s preposterous is letting a murderer like you...”

“Enough!” said Dumbledore. “We don’t need to be fighting amongst ourselves today. Harry, tell me your army’s plans.”

“But Albus,” said McGonagall, “Surely...”

“Minerva, there are hundreds of Death Eaters advancing on us, and only a few dozen adults to fight them.” She paled. “Tom was wise to draw out the aurors, and the battle will be over before they return. We will lose if we fight alone. If we fail, then all these children will likely be killed. By uniting, at least we’ll stand a chance. We need all the help we can get.” Minerva didn’t look happy, but kept silent. He then announced, “Members of Hogwarts’ Army that wish to fight may stay. The rest of you, go to your dormitories.” He turned back to Harry. “Now, tell me, what is your plan?”

Harry looked a bit surprised. “Won’t the Minister...”

With a twinkle in his eye, Dumbledore said, “I’ll deal with the Minister. Tell me your battle plan.”

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The Headmaster was very impressed with the battle plans, and allowed Harry to instruct the army to get into their positions while he arranged the castle’s defenses. His last words to Harry were, “I will try to tire Voldemort out for you.” The members of the H.A. began leaving the Great Hall. Some headed out the main doors, while two groups, one of which Harry wished he could join, were going to the towers. The group he wished he were part of was going to fly on broomsticks and attack from the sky, while the other would be shooting spells and throwing special objects from the towers. Harry

had been amazed at how well the Room of Requirement had recreated the towers so they could practice.

The Boy-Who-Lived, however, knew that he couldn't wear himself out fighting Death Eaters. He had only one primary target, and would only defend himself on the way to Voldemort, not try to take on every Death Eater, or any creatures that joined Riddle for that matter, that he saw. As he slowly marched out the emptying Great Hall, he could sense Hermione trying to catch up to him. Part of him wished he could talk her into staying behind while he listened to the sounds of the outside battle that had already begun, but the other part of him was glad to have her with him as they faced whatever fate had in store for them.

She hadn't quite caught up to Harry, when he heard a familiar drawl behind him. "Cruci...Owww," yelled Draco Malfoy. Harry had begun to move out of the way and turn at the first syllable of that hex, and when he had fully spun around, he saw Hermione giving him a muggle karate lesson he wouldn't soon forget. The pale Death Nibbler already had a black eye forming as Harry's girlfriend continued to beat him up.

"You foul, loathsome," she was punching or kicking him with each word. Harry almost felt sorry for Draco when she kicked him between the legs. He fell, but she picked him up and continued beating him. "cowardly, back-shooting..."

Harry noticed that Crabbe and Goyle were moving toward Hermione in what was apparently running to them and immediately moved between them and his girlfriend, who was still letting out over four years of hate on her nemesis, whose possibly broken nose was bleeding as he cried helplessly, "Mud-blood, when m-my fa-ther..." Harry prepared to take on both idiots, confident that could hold them off, because bulk does not win a fight if you know what you're doing. However, he didn't have to because Goyle was kicked by Neville, who began fighting him.

Harry's attention turned to Crabbe, and he began demonstrating his latest karate lessons on the example of why families shouldn't interbreed. His size couldn't save him from his well-trained opponent.

Within minutes, he was unconscious. Harry turned around to see the bruised, battered, and bleeding Draco was also 'out-like-a-light,' as was Goyle. Neville had a few red marks on his face, but was fine otherwise. Hermione looked a bit shocked at herself, and had some of her opponent's blood on her.

"Let's stupefy them and hide them so they can't help their master anymore," suggested Harry, and pulled out his wand. He then stupefied, bound in rope, and levitated Crabbe and began walking. The other two did the same until the victims were dumped unceremoniously into the same broom closet where Crabbe and Goyle had been dumped in years before, while Ron and Harry had impersonated them to find out what they could about the Chamber of Secrets. After they magically locked and silenced the door, Neville left to join his division of the H.A., wishing the young couple luck.

Harry turned to Hermione as he pulled the hood of his dragon armor over his head, and then put on his gloves. She did the same as they watched each other while listening to the fighting going on outside. He gave her a kiss that may have lasted seconds or hours, and then pulled back. Looking into her eyes, he asked, "Are you ready?" She nodded and he pulled a small twig out of his pocket and enlarged it, revealing his Firebolt. He mounted it and said, "Get on behind me, and hang on tight."

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"Alright everybody, remember your formation. Let's go!" shouted Ron as he took off on his broom. Everyone from the Gryffindor Quidditch team (besides Harry) was with them on the Astronomy tower, along with some members from the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw teams, and other students who were good at flying. Hermione had charmed regular brooms for everyone who didn't have one at least as fast as a Nimbus 2000. Each of them had a backpack full of surprises created by the Weasley twins for the enemy.

The group flew off in a formation similar to fighter planes as they began to fill the sky. Ginny was close to her brother as they moved right above Voldemort's group before being noticed and started dropping whatever they grabbed out of their bag first at the group of

Death Eaters and giants. Fred dropped a portable swamp right in front of a giant, who lost his footing and fell face first into the newly-formed mud. He pointed his wand at the monster's feet and fired five, "*Reducto!*"s – enough to hurt a magic-resistant giant enough so he couldn't get up.

George dropped something on a Death Eater that turned her into a canary, and then hit the flapping foe with a reducto, making the world a safer place. By now, the Death Eaters were firing at the aerial attackers. In the distance, great beams of light could be seen where Voldemort had begun dueling Professor Dumbledore. With some effort, Ginny Weasley tore her eyes from that incredible battle to observe her own surroundings. Her eyes resting on a familiar redhead standing on the wrong side of the battlefield.

"Look!" she shouted, "It's Percy!"

The other Weasleys glanced down to see that their brother was indeed at the battle. He wasn't wearing a mask, but was clearly on the other side as he stunned Professor Aruna of Ancient Runes. He'd been missing since the Ministry building had been taken over, but now it was obvious what had happened. Next to him was a squat woman who resembled a toad. She said something Ginny couldn't hear before pointing her wand at the youngest Weasley. Genevra prepared to zoom out of the way of whatever curse was coming, but saw that there was no need. Percy shot the toad-woman with a hex that took her head off and then glanced at his sister. During the moment where their eyes met, Percy suddenly fell over, dead.

Behind him, she saw none other than Lucius Malfoy, complete with his silver left hand, with an expression of disgust, pointing his wand where the 'blood traitor' had stood a moment ago.

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Having just left Harry and Hermione, Neville Longbottom ran out to the battle with his wand drawn. He immediately saw Susan Bones dueling two masked Death Eaters and fired a reducto at one of them, blowing off his right arm. The other was distracted for a moment, allowing Susan to take her out of the fight.

Neville heard a hissing sound near him as Susan looked at him in fright. "BEHIND YOU!" she shouted. He turned around and saw a great snake with its mouth open, getting ready to strike. Acting on pure instinct, he pointed his wand inside its mouth and shouted, "Reducto!" The blast came out the other side of the snake's head. Unfortunately, Nagini's last action of biting down on the wand succeeded in snapping it in two, although it was too late to save its own life.

Neville muttered a curse as he looked at the broken remains of his father's wand, and then pulled a large tooth out of his backpack. Everyone who knew about Horcruxes had been carrying basilisk a fang, so that they'd be able to dispose of Nagini if they happened upon her. Without hesitation, he pulled back the tooth and stabbed Nagini's corpse, causing a scream to emit as green smoke emanated from it.

Susan watched in confusion. "What was..."

"Reducto!" shouted a Death Eater, hitting Susan square on the chest, causing her to fall. Neville ran, unarmed, at the masked killer. He aimed his wand at Longbottom, who managed to duck down, at the same time, kicking his attacker in the hip. He fell down, Neville grabbed his wand, and shot a, "*Reducto!*" at the killer's head.

As Neville ran back to Susan to find her smiling, pointing out that she was wearing one of the dragon vests, Harry and Hermione zoomed past on his Firebolt. They had exited the building just in time to see Neville destroy the last Horcrux. The brightest witch of her age acted as her boyfriend's gunner, shooting any enemies she could, while keeping her left arm firmly wrapped around Potter. She grinned as she saw six Death Eaters taken down by fire from the tower, glad to see that that division of the H.A. was doing its job. She frowned when she saw a giant punch Angelina Johnson, who'd flown too low, off of her broom, but knew they couldn't help her. They had more important things to do.

She barely heard Ginny scream, "Look! It's Percy," but clearly recognized the missing Weasley standing next to his boss, Umbridge, who she knew from a picture in the '*Howler*.'

She heard Umbridge say in a sweet voice. "Look, Weasley, it's your foolish, blood-traitor sister," as she aimed her wand. Hermione pointed her wand at the large toad as she said, "*Avada...*"

At that moment, Hermione watched as the witch's head was blown off, but not by her. She watched Percy, with his wand still out, look at his sister, whose life he'd saved, for a moment before falling forward, dead. She saw Lucius looking at his latest victim as he muttered, "Filthy blood-traitor," and then glanced at them as Harry steered them closer to the battle between Voldemort and Dumbledore. "Ah, Potter." He pointed his wand at them. "Av..." He now fell over dead, and Hermione stared in shock at Severus Snape, who was pointing his wand where Lucius had stood.

"I always knew you were a traitor, Snape!" said a nearby high-pitched voice. "*Avada Kedavra!*" A green beam of light shot from Riddle's wand to Snape's chest, killing him instantly. Tom turned his attention toward them. "Ah! Harry Potter and his mudblood. I assume you're here to join your precious headmaster." It was at that moment that Hermione noticed Dumbledore lying on the ground, dead at Voldemort's feet. The Dark Lord conjured a thick, black wall around them, "So no one will bother us."

Harry stopped the broom and they got off, leaving the Firebolt to fall on the ground. Harry said, "Let's get this over with," as they all pointed their wands.

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At the same time, Sirius Black was locked in combat with his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange.

"I've missed the little talks we'd have in Azkaban," he said while dodging another green beam of light. He shot a silent reducto at her. "...where you said you wanted to die."

"Crucio!" Sirius dodged that one as well. "I don't miss you, you filthy blood-traitor! Born as the future head of a great family, only to betray your own blood-status! *Avada Kedavra!*"

Sirius jumped out of the way of that one as well, but it put a hole in the robe he was wearing.

Bella continued, "Hanging out with other blood-traitors, half-bloods and mudbloods! Crucio!"

This shot hit him, and he found himself fall to the ground as his cousin cackled at him. Years of blocking his feelings in Azkaban gave him a lot more tolerance for suffering than most people. He managed to keep his shaky hands on his wand, aim it in her general direction, and say, "Re-duc-to!" A red beam of light shot from his wand, hitting Bellatrix in the forehead. The result wasn't pretty, but the world had been made a better place. His smile turned into a frown as he heard Tom Riddle loudly gloat at Harry about killing Dumbledore. He turned back to the fighting.

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McGonagall had watched the headmaster go after You-Know-Who, and had immediately put all her skills into destroying as many enemies as possible. She had already killed seven Death Eaters, not that she was proud of it – but this was war. She was currently fighting another masked killer. She pointed her wand at his mask and silently transfigured it into a giant leech. He screamed in pain as he dropped his wand, and Minerva instantly relieved him of that terrible pain. Incidentally, she also relieved that murderer of his life. She paled as she heard Voldemort say in the distance, "Ah! Harry Potter and his mudblood. I assume you're here to join your precious headmaster."

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Professor Flitwick grinned as he saw yet another enemy fall victim to the Weasley twins' weapons, wondering why they never used their exceptional talents in the classroom. He knew they'd gotten an 'O' on their Charms O.W.L., but he still hadn't been able to get them to do much in his class.

He turned his attention back to the giant he was fighting and shot a, "Reducto!" straight into its left eye. The creature howled in pain as it swing its leg at Flitwick, who barely moved away in time. Suddenly, the point of a large arrow came out of the giant's chest. It looked

down with its one eye in horror, and fell over, dead. Flitwick gave a curt nod at Hagrid, who was standing a distance away with his crossbow.

The small professor then turned toward a group of three Death Eaters, using his size and speed to his advantage as he'd done in the 'good old days' when he was a professional duelist. When the last one had fallen, a giant foot came up behind him and kicked him. The petite man was hurled about thirty feet by the kick.

Hagrid ran up to that giant with tears in his eyes and began punching it in the waist with everything he had, until he realized that he had a better target. One half-giant punch to the crotch sent that giant falling to the ground in agony, and Rubeus picked his crossbow back up and did what he had to do. Then he heard the voice of Tom Riddle in the distance telling Harry and Hermione that they were about to join the headmaster, obviously meaning he was dead. He roared and then ran at the nearest Death Eater in a rage that no one had ever seen him in, and promptly tore him in half.

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Side by side, Harry and Hermione were exchanging spells with someone who was probably the most powerful wizard alive. If you could call the rat-faced undead creature with a tail a wizard, that is. Hermione transfigured the ground beneath Tom into quicksand, but he pointed his wand at the ground, freezing it at the same time he dodged a silent *reducto* from Harry.

"I see you've been learning a few tricks," he taunted, distracting Harry from the fact that his freezing charm had reached all the way to his foe.

"I've learned enough," Harry answered, taking a step, only to slip. He barely gained his footing in time to duck a green bolt of magic. "I know about your Horcruxes."

This got Riddle's attention, though he pretended it didn't worry him. "Is that so?" He conjured what looked like fifty bullets and sent them hurling at the young couple.

As he ducked down to avoid them, Harry said, "First the diary." The bullets went past both of them while their nemesis watched through his red eyes. Hermione shot a, "Reducto!" that Voldemort easily avoided.

CRACK! Unnoticed by the young couple, the conjured bullets turned around, and now hit them in the back. If they hadn't been wearing their full body armor, they'd have been dead. As it was, they both fell forward, and would have several bruises. Both of their wands had been snapped.

Voldemort laughed as he declared. "That's exactly where you be...what!"

From the ground, Harry sent a wandless reducto at his mortal enemy's foot, breaking it off and sending him to the ground. "Did you notice your snake die a few minutes ago? It was stabbed with a basilisk tooth."

While Harry and Hermione stood up, Riddle formed a silver foot on himself and put his wand away. "No more holding back!" he spat, as a huge ball of fire with a six-foot radius was shot straight at them.

Knowing they couldn't dodge it, both shot a freezing charm out of each hand. The fireball fell to the ground frozen and shattered two inches away from them. Harry said evenly, "Dumbledore's fingers were hurt while he destroyed Slytherin's ring." He would mourn for the headmaster later; right now, he had to win this battle for everyone, and would use whatever psychological means were necessary to distract his foe.

For an instant, there was a flicker of fear in Voldemort's eyes. "The old fool! No wonder he was so easy to kill." Voldemort pointed at the grass, which turned into Devil's Snare and began grabbing at them.

Clenching his teeth, Harry apparated directly behind Voldemort and kneed him in the back, causing him to fall down. Hermione, who'd appeared next to her boyfriend a moment later, banished him into the deadly plant, which began grabbing at him while he transfigured it back into grass. He rolled away, trying to avoid two hexes sent at him, but only dodged one. The other, a cutting curse sent by Hermione,

sliced his rat-tail in two. He got up, pretending he wasn't in pain, and sent a cloud of dust at them.

After both put on bubblehead charms, Harry continued, "I'll bet you never knew that Regulus black stole Slytherin's locket from you. It was actually in Black Manor, my godfather's house."

A green beam of light shot out of both of Voldemort's palms in his rage over that news. They were easily avoided, and both Harry and Hermione had an opening at their opponent. He summoned a nearby rock straight at Riddle's head while she froze the ground beneath his feet. As he ducked to avoid the rock, he slipped and fell. He roared, angry that he'd had his own idea used against him. He decided to conjure new bullets to fly at them, but the couple banished them back toward him this time. He barely avoided them.

Harry said with a grin, "It was a bit more complicated to get Hufflepuff's cup out of the Lestrage vault," as he sent a stream of petrol from his hand at the monster in front of him. While Voldemort was trying to block his face, Hermione shot a small fireball at him. Riddle screamed in agony as he managed a freezing spell, but now his rat-face was even more scarred than ever.

"Crucio!" Voldemort shouted as the spell shot out of both of his hands toward Harry, giving him no place to dodge. It hit his exposed face, and he fell to the ground, feeling more pain than ever before.

Speaking for the first time since the duel began, Hermione said, "We couldn't believe it that you'd hidden Ravenclaw's Diadem in the same room that almost every Hogwarts student uses to hide things in," as she sent a reducto that blasted off Riddle's right hand and released Harry from his torment.

"Shut up, MUDBLOOD!" he shouted, as a sectumsempra hit her square in chest, knocking her down.

At that moment, while Harry was still on the ground, he felt more rage than ever before. He shouted, "The one in me was destroyed, too!" as a reducto shot out of every one of Harry's fingers, which were all pointed at Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was blasted to pieces.

The wall around them vanished to reveal that the battle around them was over. More allies than Harry would care to imagine were lying on the ground around them, but no foes were standing up.

Harry didn't notice his friends making their way toward him as he ran to Hermione, only to find her smiling at him, although she was obviously in pain. "My armor stopped the hex. I was only winded."

At that moment, Harry began to feel the pain from his own injuries, especially the bullets that had hit his back. "We'd better get back to the castle."

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Epilogue:

"And last, but certainly not least," said Minister Vehosia. "The Order of Merlin, First Class, goes to Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

It was approximately six weeks after the final battle, the last day of term at Hogwarts before the break, and at the Minister's insistence, they were having an awards banquet in the Great Hall. The Ministry building had needed much renovation after the aurors, who had won the small battle in Diagon Alley, were sent to take back their headquarters. There weren't many people left there, and those that were there had been disheartened to hear that their master was dead. The Ministry of Magic would be officially moving back during the holiday break, so that the departure wouldn't disrupt the school.

The young couple took the awards from the Minister and blushed at the applause. They joined everyone else who had been awarded during the ceremony. Everyone who had participated in the battle got an Order of Merlin, at least third class. Harry sat next to Professor Flitwick, who was not killed in the battle, but injured in such a way that he would need a cane for the rest of his life. He, along with Ron, Fred, George, Angelina Johnson (who was alive but could no longer play Quidditch because of a bad arm she got when she fell), McGonagall and Hagrid, had received a second class Order of Merlin.

No Weasley aside from Percy was killed or hurt, and Ginny had made sure to tell everyone the circumstances of her brother's death. Harry

would never understand why Snape had saved his life by turning on Lucius, but wondered if it had something to do with why Dumbledore had trusted him. Since both of them were now dead, he had no one to ask.

McGonagall had recently been confirmed Hogwarts' new Headmistress by the board of Governors. The only teacher that had been killed was Professor Vector of Arithmancy. Hermione had taken the death hard, and Harry had done his best to comfort her. The new Headmistress replaced that teacher within two weeks of the battle, and classes had resumed.

Hermione whispered to Harry, "What do you have planned for the holidays?"

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Twas the night before Christmas

When at Privet Drive

An invisible motorbike

Came down from the sky

It carried Harry Potter

Hermione Granger, too

They began dropping dung bombs

'Til twelve thirty-two

The door opened wide

Revealing a man

Who soon began yelling

According to plan

The bike flew above him

Dung bombs were then dropped

Until Vernon Dursley

Was covered with crap.

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The End

Please review. Thank you to those who have.

For anyone interested, this is what happened afterwards:

In June 1996, Harry and Hermione passed their O.W.L.s with flying colors.

In June 1997, Harry officially proposed to Hermione.

In September 1997, Harry and Hermione became Head Boy and Girl.

In June 1998, they passed their N.E.W.T.s with flying colors, and more importantly, Harry and Hermione got married. Both of them ended up teaching at Hogwarts – D.A.D.A. and Transfiguration, respectively.

Harry, Hermione, and Neville all kept up with their karate lessons, and eventually earned a Black belt.